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Relational area studies: Russia and geographies of knowledge

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Abstract

Despite valid criticisms that Area Studies is premised on geopolitical, orientalising, and Eurocentric logics, we advocate for the more critically aware and reflexive potential of Relational Area Studies. By this, we mean that the study of external spaces and areas should always be accompanied by critical efforts to examine internal processes of knowledge production. We therefore build on 'Worlding of Geography' approaches to foster an in-between thinking for Area Studies research. This involves examining an area 'out there' while simultaneously considering the relational spaces 'in here'. Focusing on the illuminating case of Russian Studies, we examine the hierarchies of power and geographies of knowledge associated with scholarly production in and about Russia. We do so by providing an in-depth, comparative analysis of materials in English-language and Russian-language scholarly journals. The results of this empirical study help us reflect on the 'commonsensical' practices, assumptions, and frameworks that often go unchecked in mainstream western scholarship. From our 'in here'–'out there' perspective, we use these findings to pose awkward questions about our biases and privileges within global hierarchies of power and geographies of knowledge. Ultimately, we believe this type of relational engagement helps us enrich, decolonise, and rethink our own scholarly practices. Area Studies, we argue, should learn from the insights of critical geography and should be one of the foremost venues for this type of vibrant, reflexive, and critical engagement. Our framework helps us move beyond binary conceptualisations of the Global North/South and East/West by including careful consideration of the 'in-between' spaces and relational knowledge flows that accompany all global knowledge. We also include a few preliminary notes on the implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, highlighting the applicability of our approach to future scholarship of Russia, but also how the war challenges some of our core assumptions.

KEYWORDS

Area Studies, geography of knowledge, global theory, Relational Area Studies, Russia, Russian Studies

1 | INTRODUCTION

The reflexive and critical turn across the Humanities and the Social and Behavioural Sciences has highlighted how global inequalities of power are central in the construction and dissemination of knowledge (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008; Pasha & Murphy, 2002). We use these critical premises as our starting point to examine the illuminating case of Area Studies scholarship. While much focus is currently attuned (rightly) to hierarchies of knowledge, we argue that more work is needed to tease out the complex, relational interactions between spaces 'here' and 'there'. Considering our own position as Area Studies scholars, we present an empirically-grounded, and relational, approach to help scholars reflect on the complex knowledge production practices that often remain unnoticed.

Area Studies is a particularly fruitful object of study when attempting to tease out the epistemic boundaries and contours of knowledge production. On the one hand, Area Studies can be seen as part of an emancipatory project, aligned with Subaltern Studies, that seeks to give voice to areas outside of the Global North and 'developed' west (Lee, 2005). On the other hand, Area Studies has been critiqued for its own geopolitical logics and orientalising modalities (Klinke, 2015) that construct and reify geographical entities to fit the orientalising gaze of scholars located in privileged spaces (Wolf, 1994, pp. 4–5).

In terms of global power relations, Russian Studies (*rossievedenie*) is of particular interest, owing to Russia's semi-peripheral global status, perhaps best summed up by Viacheslav Morozov's (2015) description of Russia as a 'subaltern empire'. According to this logic, Russia is orientalised and marginalised by a hegemonic west, while simultaneously attempting to carve out an imperial, hegemonic position of its own within the space of the former Soviet Union (Tlostanova, 2015). The complexities of Russia's position within these hierarchies of power therefore demand careful consideration. It is important to take into account global power dispersions: in this respect, Russian scholarship suffers constraints similar to those of other peripheralised sites of knowledge production. At the same time, it is essential to consider political, cultural, and ideological factors that emerge within Russia's national spaces, affecting the nature of Russian scholarship. These issues have been brought to the fore dramatically, and with tragic consequences, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 (only a few days after we had submitted a revised version of our manuscript). This war throws up a series of complicated and morally challenging questions about hierarchies and geographies of knowledge, decolonialisation, as well as political responsibilities of scholarly practices – themes that are central to this research project.

With these intricacies in mind, our research answers Alison Stenning's call for a more critically reflexive examination of Area Studies that takes into account 'relational geographies' (2005, p. 378). By this, Stenning means that areas do not exist solely 'out there'. Instead, we exist in a world that is inherently relational, wherein 'out there' and 'in here' frequently overlap. We expand on these concepts to further the understanding of what we call Relational Area Studies (RAS). For us, RAS emerges as a connective tissue, an in-between space that should always strive to study processes comparatively and reflexively, identifying dialectic relationships and uneven developments between geographies of knowledge production and dissemination.

As we conceptualise it, 'in-betweenness' fosters a border thinking that accentuates tensions of different approaches and symbolises the heterogeneity of 'in heres' and 'out theres'. In short, we theorise an in-between space that asks Area Studies scholars to reflect on social, economic, and political biases and influences from their own spaces 'in here', while simultaneously considering similar issues from the perspective of scholarship 'out there'. We ultimately argue that any scholar engaged in the study of an 'area' should pay close attention to the 'out there–in here' spectrum. By bringing multiple different voices to the fore and exploring their interconnections, our relational approach helps to overcome the well-grounded accusations that Area Studies often reifies and orientalises geographical distinctions. This approach highlights the discourses of situated difference, while simultaneously bridging divides, deconstructing established boundaries, and creating preconditions for the much-desired worlding of scholarship. In-betweenness consequently hints at the process of acknowledging the spatial history of sociological thought (its unique embeddedness in specific conditions and events). It also helps to uncover the inextricable links between different knowledges and thus can take us beyond the dichotomous depictions of the west and the rest.

In this paper, we consequently explore this in-betweenness empirically by comparing materials from English and Russian-language scholarly journals. These interpretive data are used to provide concrete reflections on how our understandings of the spaces 'out there' are inherently influenced by practices and assumptions 'in here', and vice versa, claiming our broader agency in the co-creation of knowledges about the areas. Consequently, in our concluding remarks, we reflect on the relevance of RAS to the future of Russian Studies, Central/East European Studies, and Ukrainian Studies.

As we suggest, relational perspectives are needed now more than ever if we wish to achieve thoughtful, fruitful, and honest discussion around persisting epistemological colonisation.

2 | AREA STUDIES, GLOBAL THEORY, AND RUSSIA

Area Studies emerged in the 20th century as a scholarly attempt to deepen understanding of world regions. Despite commitments to produce new knowledges about social spaces, Area Studies has long been criticised for failing to overcome essentialised images of 'out thereness', uncritically reproducing modes of thought, homogenising regions, establishing epistemological asymmetries and hierarchies, and naturalising discourses that assess places according to their stages of development (Escobar, 2007; Harding, 2008; Mignolo, 2011; Walsh, 2007). According to Tessa Morris-Suzuki (2000), this tendency of essentialising external space has been largely preordained by the history of areal divisions that crystallised after the Second World War and during the subsequent power struggles of the Cold War. In more contemporary literatures, Area Studies is consequently often viewed as problematically entangled with colonial histories and the development discourses of the privileged core (Sidaway et al., 2016, pp. 780–781). From the relational perspective, Area Studies may therefore seem an inherently unhelpful arena for critical reflection on global knowledge production. 'Out there' is overwhelmingly perceived from the 'in here' perspective of the west. This can lead to overly simplistic juxtapositions of advanced and modern 'in heres' against backwards and traditional 'out theres', whose ways of knowing are 'at best folkloric' (Walsh, 2007, p. 225).

Latterly, however, we have witnessed far-reaching revisions of previous scholarship, significantly altering '*what* comes under the rubric of Area Studies, *how* it is pursued and *who* funds it' (Sidaway et al., 2016, p. 780). The vitriolic questioning of the overall benefit and purpose of Area Studies has led to profound scholarly self-examination and engagement with a range of 'trans' perspectives (for example, translocality, transnationalism, or transregionalism; Mielke & Hornidge, 2016, p. 8). Furthermore, aided by deterritorialisation tendencies within Global Studies, Area Studies have become engaged in a project deconstructing the conventional focus on 'areas': representing no more than 'fictional cartographies' (Mignolo, 2014), areas slowly cease to exist as primary objects of analysis. Instead, they become a 'means of transforming knowledge production' and orienting global futures (Chen, 2010, p. 216). They become a subject capable of provincialising theory and challenging the conventionally fixed power–knowledge order (Mielke & Hornidge, 2016, p. 15).

Aside from how Area Studies scholarship is pursued, where it is pursued has also changed. In the past, Area Studies has been largely constituted by research produced mainly in the USA and (western) Europe, whereas the non-west was perceived as a place of 'parochial wisdom', a mere source of 'raw materials' necessary for the theory-building of the centre (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2016, p. 1). Recent intellectual movements (for example, Subaltern Studies) have increasingly shifted these perspectives, trying to allow the subaltern to speak and offering previously marginalised insights from 'out there' into the workings of the world order, trying to go beyond simplistic North–South or East–West binaries.

The efforts to move beyond the west's long-lasting hegemony have indeed been significant and have led to the emergence of critical scholarship under the rubric of Global South Studies. Yet, in practice, 'theory from the south'[1] (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2016) exists uneasily with a simultaneous process of rewesternisation (further expansion of the Global North) that attempts to maintain a world order with a power centre located clearly in the western world (Mignolo, 2014). The result of these divergent trajectories is the continuous prevalence of tangible intellectual/political asymmetries between the core and periphery (Dzenovska, 2018; Gapova, 2008). The asymmetries are reflected, for example, in the existence and reproduction of certain academic literatures and the continued dominance of English for scholarly publishing. This can help shape audiences, research themes, and methodologies.

Apart from prevailing asymmetrical knowledge configuration between the Global North and the Global South, the notion of globality also clearly lacks voices from the 'Global East' (Müller, 2018), representing a persistent blind spot for Global Studies. The East that emerged from the ashes of the socialist world is composed both of the colonisers and the colonised, victims and aggressors, and as such does not fall easily into the new binary geopolitical divisions of North/South. It is neither considered a part of the intelligible North, no matter how hard it attempts to imitate or adapt to western epistemological hegemony (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006), nor included into the project of theorising from the South that pushes for decolonial knowledge. It is, at best, a 'secondary South' that, according to Martin Müller, 'does not fit the frame through which we think the global' (2018, pp. 7–8). Although there have been attempts to create theories from the ex-Socialist East (see, e.g., Dzenovska & Kurtović, 2018; Tlostanova, 2017), these attempts remain scarce, as are the attempts to address the links or parallels between the Global South, North, and the East (see Tlostanova, 2018).

As a result, places outside the Global North are still rarely considered as subjects in their own right. Consequently, scholars based in and from Russia are inherently disadvantaged when trying to articulate their own conditions or produce models of critical thinking for wider audiences. Their isolation from global scholarship is, however, not always seen as a result of externally imposed practices. Rather, it is equally internally induced (Tlostanova, 2015, pp. 47–50). Andrey Makarychev and Viacheslav Morozov (2013) suggest, for example, that in the field of scholarship local Russian authors are far too often locked up in a debate among themselves: instead of exploring how to translate their own experiences, or how to challenge and expand dominant assumptions from the scholarly core, they prefer to discuss Russia's exceptionalism. In so doing, they support the country's own geopolitical agenda. Vladimir Gel'man (2015) also notes the growing detachment of Russian scholarship from international debates. He reprimands local scholars for their limited empirical diversity, uncritical treatment of theories, as well as ignorance of foreign frameworks. Consequently, Russian scholars remain seemingly unable to provide sound counter-hegemonic insights that would stand up to the 'positive, empirical, and comparative' 'modern' political science of western Europe and the USA (Gel'man, 2015, p. 31).

Aware of this relatively limited inclusion of voices across Russian Studies into a dialogue around global knowledge production, in this paper we take a missing snapshot of dominant representations, conceptualisations, and understandings of Russia across different strands of scholarship. Our primary aim is to assess how regional specialists can better understand the complex interactions of national, international, and global flows of knowledge, and how we can use these insights to reflect critically on our own scholarly practices. Critical geographers and Global Studies specialists are increasingly examining the 'worlding' of knowledge, attempting to decolonise global knowledge by theorising back at the Global North. As a result, this body of work often provides ahistorical accounts of theory production without considering how 'the core is already being spoken to' and appropriates knowledges and categories produced elsewhere (for critique, see Wray et al., 2013, p. 183).

Our approach builds on this critique and examines the relational content of knowledge production alongside its geographical situatedness. Our aim is therefore not to reclaim the territory of Russian Studies from the North American or western European experiences. Instead, we explore Russian Studies in Russia, its theoretical and conceptual approaches, the practices imbued within this scholarship, and (crucially) the relations of these factors to broader scholarship published outside Russia. As such, we seek to foster RAS as an in-between space that, in the words of Sharad Chari (2016, p. 792), is committed to see the world through the lenses of hierarchies, simultaneous interconnections, and enduring differences. It is a space where the epistemic boundaries are done and undone.

For us, this commitment entails reflection on the site 'out there' with its dynamic practices and specificities, the self-reflective focus on changing intellectual and methodological vantage points of 'in here' from which the 'out there' is assessed, as well as mechanisms that determine the relationship between the two. Acknowledging the shifting spaces, transformations, and mutations, RAS works towards scholarship that exists beyond the Global West/North and the Global East (or South) dichotomy, privileging multiple differences, overlaps, and transgressions instead.

3 | METHODOLOGY

Despite recent attention towards the geographical and sociological contours of knowledge production, there have been few studies that have attempted to provide rich comparative analysis of scholarship produced in different geographical settings. As Fran Collyer notes, the 'old' and 'new' sociologies of knowledge traditionally focus too narrowly, respectively, on the social location of knowledge producers and the practices and institutions that make knowledge possible (2018, p. 57). Indeed, we heed Collyer's advice to pay attention to the way knowledge production 'has coherence across multiple sites and yet displays systematic boundaries and mechanisms of exclusion across and between countries and regions of the world' (p. 57).

This influences our methodological choices, as we seek to examine critically how knowledges of 'out there' and 'in here' are produced. As such, our empirical data are drawn from scholarly discourses in academic journals – the most obvious platforms for the dissemination of scholarly knowledge. To capture different aspects of 'out there' and 'in here', we compare academic outputs from four leading scholarly journals across two language spaces of Russian and English: *Europe-Asia Studies* (*EAS*), *Post-Soviet Affairs* (*PSA*), *Russian World* (*Mir Rossii*, *RW*), and *Polis: International Studies* (*Polis*). These journals represent different geographical sites of knowledge: *Europe-Asia Studies* is published in the UK and *Post-Soviet Affairs* is published in the USA; both *Russian World* and *Polis* are published in Russia. This reflects the widely acknowledged divide between (scholarly) hierarchies of power in the Global North compared to the Global South and the oft-forgotten Global East (Kagarlitsky & Sergeev, 2013).

While it is impossible to select entirely analogous journals from Russia and 'the west', the choices are underpinned by certain similarities in their editorial objectives and disciplinary scope. Both *EAS* and *RW* are interdisciplinary Area Studies journals, inviting submissions from across the social sciences and humanities. *Europe-Asia Studies* (as its name suggests) offers a broader regional perspective than *Russian World*. Nevertheless, the greater number of articles published annually means that they both produce a similar volume of scholarship dedicated to Russia. *PSA* and *Polis*, for their part, are more focused on international relations and political science. Again, *Post-Soviet Affairs* generally covers a broader geographical area than *Polis*. However, the majority of articles published in *PSA* centre specifically on Russia.

We focus primarily on Area Studies because this is the venue where the bulk of English-language research on Russia is published. It is therefore the discipline wherein we find concentrated insights into how research 'out there' is conducted and presented. While *PSA* has a narrower, more political focus than *EAS*, many of the authors in our sample widely publish in Area Studies journals and are embedded in Area Studies networks.[2] Our journal selection is, of course, not unproblematic and potentially misses out how 'out there' is examined from other disciplinary perspectives or spaces of knowledge production. Nevertheless, we feel that our insights are useful to scholars across a broad range of disciplinary and geographical boundaries, helping to identify key ways to address our relative spatial positions within hierarchies of knowledge and along the 'out there–in here' spectrum we describe.

Our database is comprised of all articles within our chosen journals published in 2017 that focused primarily on any aspect of Russian studies. This generated a database of 75 articles (see Table 1). It was difficult to derive clear-cut coding categories because we were less interested in narrow thematic patterns than with the wider ways that Russia was studied. Following a careful reading of all articles by both authors (one a native Russian speaker and one a native English speaker), we produced a set of codes that, we felt, could help address our main research aims, namely: overarching theoretical and conceptual frameworks; the historical, cultural, and political contextualisation of the extant studies (i.e., which factors were highlighted or privileged within the studies); the specific practices and norms of scholarship (i.e., how data are presented, the structuring of sections, the formation of literature reviews and methodological data, etc.); the actors that find prominence or are ignored; the literatures and debates that authors engage with; and finally, the placement of Russia temporally and spatially.

These categories could be criticised for being overly broad. However, they were developed to draw our attention to key differences and similarities across the two sites of scholarship. While the coding was used to investigate specific issues, our main focus was not a micro-analysis of each of these areas. Instead, we aimed to build a picture of how scholarship of 'out there' and 'in here' was constructed along a series of theoretical, conceptual, temporal, spatial, and practice-based axes. The broad categories were divided into smaller subcategories as the data were studied and as clearer foci were identified within the sample. A key concern was identifying differences and overlaps within the data, and then asking ourselves what could explain these. This exercise proved particularly fruitful in turning our attention from 'out there' to 'in here' – for example, asking ourselves why the English-language articles were constructed in certain ways, or why the authors employed methodological, thematic, and contextualising approaches not found in the Russian-language articles. Articles from our database are referenced using their acronym/short form and a number that corresponds to the chronological order in which they were published, e.g., EAS1, PSA14, RW6, or Polis18.

An important facet of our RAS approach is reflexivity concerning our practices. There is nothing new in saying that gendered and embodied academic perspectives co-produce the knowledge of the social world that we seek to study. However, while we encounter a wealth of literature on this topic across disciplines, the ways of experiencing and knowing appear frequently presented as a mere recognition of one's situatedness mostly hidden as clues in footnotes, acknowledgements,

TABLE 1 Articles selected for analysis and author affiliations by country

Journal	English language		Russian language	
	Europe-Asia Studies (UK)	*Post-Soviet Affairs* (USA)	*Russian World* (Russia)	*Polis: International Studies* (Russia)
No. of articles	20	21	16	18
Authors' institutional affiliations by country	Russia (10), UK (5), USA (3), Germany (2), Finland (1), Canada (1), Ireland (1), Netherlands (1), Sweden (1), Finland/Canada (1)	Russia (9), USA (8), UK (6), Norway (4), USA/Russia (3), Sweden (2), Czechia (2), Australia (1), Germany (1), Canada (1)	Russia (21)	Russia (23), Estonia (1), USA (1)

or in a bibliography (see Mahmud, 2014; Pink, 2015). Even more problematic, as Audrey Alejandro (2020, p. 5) notes, is that reflexive approaches rarely attend to the broader cultural assumptions and socialisation through which the researcher develops mechanisms to perceive the world.

Our methodology is designed to ensure that our reflexivity is more than a mere side note. When examining our comparative data, across the six coding categories outlined above, a major step for us was to situate ourselves along the 'out there–in here' spectrum – a process that applies to all scholars wishing to follow RAS. This allows us to scrutinise the so-called 'common senses' (Herzfeld, 2015) that often go unchecked, problematically affecting our own ways of knowing about Russia and Russian scholarship. This, of course, applies equally to Russian scholars who are writing from the 'in here' perspective as well as to more complex spaces, such as where authors originally from Russia are now based in non-Russian institutions, or when authors based in Russia publish in English-language journals (see author affiliation data in Table 1).

In terms of our own reflexivity, while we both share different cultural backgrounds, our academic careers have been nevertheless shaped by very similar media, political, and social discourses that have provided a relatively clear image of 'the west' as 'the ideal normative referent' (Alejandro, 2019, p. 4). Our situatedness within such discourses that invoke Otherness potentially leave seemingly little room to discover the hidden interpretations and representations of Russia. As we discussed our research together, we noted how we assumed that the quality of Russian scholarship was negatively affected by the narrowing of space for freedom of speech and expression. As we became aware, this was directly reflected in our proportionally lower use of Russian-language literatures during different phases of this research. Analysing Russian-language articles, we became furthermore confronted with methods of argumentation, writing styles, and structures somewhat different to our understandings of 'appropriate' scholarly practices. Although we were not necessarily able to locate ways that Russian-language scholarship offered ground-breaking insights into how scholarship can be conducted (we point to a few areas below), our approach did allow us to review many assumptions about our own epistemological work.

As a major limitation of our study, we admit that our approach has the potential to essentialise the two geographical spaces that we delineate – Russian and English-language scholarship. This is a difficult challenge to overcome and one that, ultimately, this research seeks to redress at least partially. We do hope, however, that the 'out there–in here' spectrum offers a chance to view the complex overlaps in geographies of knowledge production, thereby allowing us to see beyond overly simplified binaries.

4 | GEOGRAPHIES OF KNOWLEDGE AND ACADEMIC PRACTICES

One of the most productive areas for us to examine and contrast 'out there–in here' perspectives was within the realm of practices. Influenced by the 'practice turn' in Science and Technology Studies (Soler et al., 2014), we examined how scholars structure their academic articles, how they access their primary and secondary data sources, and which approaches are seen as valid within various sites of knowledge production.

Our methodological approach admittedly cannot facilitate scrutiny of the full range of practices that go into scholarly endeavours. From our relational perspective, we are, however, able to observe some striking differences in how the texts were structured. In many of the English-language materials, for example, there was often a clear understanding that the Russian case study should be used to illuminate wider social phenomena. These authors highlighted the wider theoretical or conceptual value of their research far more persistently than the sampled Russian-language authors, for example: 'The Russian experience reveals the need to comparatively explore demobilisation processes *in non-democratic settings*' (EAS8, emphasis added). Or: 'This paper uses the results of 43 gubernatorial elections in Russia's regions to test the relative strength of two alternative explanations for electoral competition under authoritarianism' (PSA15).

The attempts to situate knowledge within wider scholarly claims chimes with the argument of World Systems theorists (see Morozov, 2015, pp. 79–80) who depict the so-called 'first world' as a producer of scientific theory, whereas the 'third world' appears as a mere provider of local expertise and data (Tickner, 2013, p. 631). From our relational perspective, however, it is necessary to consider these issues alongside (i.e., not ignoring) broader power relations. The western expectation that research should demonstrate wide significance, for example, is actively encouraged by a host of institutional practices. One prominent example is the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF), which is used to assess research quality and to determine research funding allocations to UK universities. Alongside 'rigour' and 'originality', the REF assesses the 'significance' of research, disincentivising Area Studies scholarship that focuses too narrowly on single, unique case studies. In other words, Russia is not necessarily a valid object of study in its own right.

Thinking about the 'generally implicit, background properties' (Abend et al., 2013, p. 641) that enable or constrain acceptable academic claims is essential. For example, it helped us understand the widespread tendency that we observed for English-language authors to ground their research within frameworks of authoritarianism – thereby claiming wider significance beyond the Russian case. At the same time, it is also possible to see the common use of these frameworks as a symptom of a 'Eurocentric development discourse and modernist epistemology' preoccupied with narrow readings of power and geography (Gibson-Graham, 2004, p. 407). Nowadays this serves as a common critique of western approaches to Area Studies, which guide the debates and agendas around Russia in particular ways and produce 'political and institutional preconditions for actions – or the intentional lack thereof' (Vihma, 2018, p. 5).

Bringing more voices to the fore clearly remains a challenge, especially due to the 'epistemological privilege of the Anglosphere' (Müller, 2021, p. 16). Many Russian scholars continue to experience barriers when attempting to integrate their work within specific methodological and theoretical expectations of the international 'mainstream'. This exclusion, according to Pavel Sorokin (2014, p. 117), results largely from different national traditions of Russian social thought that follow their own logics and practices and might seem odd from the gaze of an outside observer. Russian authors are often criticised for their lack of theoretical engagement with mainstream academic frameworks, poor presentation of research material, not to mention arguably poor writing skills (Ventsel & Struchkova, 2016, p. 121). As we approached this research, this was perhaps a perspective we both shared. Having been trained in western traditions (which, we need to add, are by no means homogenous), some of the practices in Russian-language scholarship therefore initially seemed odd to us as they did not always correspond to our socialised expectations and practices. For example, openly moral, philosophical, and normative statements, which Sorokin (2014, p. 121) regards as central for Russian social thought, are actively discouraged in most western journals, but were more common in the Russian context:

> Russia is consistently referred to as an intolerant country. And this is entirely correct – in the sense that Russian self-consciousness can never orient itself tolerantly to the legalisation of sin ... The supporters of liberal democracy call this hard-line position 'Russian intolerance,' but their opponents call it moral firmness and strength of the soul.
>
> (Polis15)

One explanation for Russian-language scholarship's different structure and approach to the English-language scholarship can be found in the different political, social, economic, and institutional expectations faced by a local scholar. These peculiar expectations emerge, on the one hand, through the Russian state's orientation towards a neoliberal education system that calls for increased internationalisation. On the other hand, Russian scholarship can be seen through the lens of increased state control, with direct oversight over scientific practices and attempts to frame 'distinct' Russian sciences (Funk, 2017, p. 6; see also Dubrovskiy, 2019). According to Gapova, these conflicting tendencies contribute to the existence of two 'implicitly delineated and partially overlapping knowledge systems' (2011, p. 289): one that pursues the 'Soviet' model of knowledge production and the other that focuses on international models of knowledge reproduction, legitimised by mainstream international approaches.

Approaching Russian scholarship not as unified but as a dynamic and multifaceted (relational) field, in our opinion, provides space to see overlaps between many of the Russian and English-language articles. Several Russian-language articles, for example, situated themselves within, and replicated, international frameworks as a point of departure for their own local empirical analysis. Others used them as a testing ground, questioning the applicability of western approaches for the Russian context. For example, one author asked: 'Has the path imposed by the West become Russia's own path?' and 'are there alternatives to these tendencies?' (RW7). Other scholars sought broader conceptual contributions, while operating outside the typically western frameworks of authoritarianism. This was the case for RW12: 'The purpose of this article is to determine the possible directions of using the concepts of social inertia (path-dependence) as a tool for testing the hypotheses of civilizational analysis.' In turn, in an English-language article one author examines the multipolar world order theory, as developed in Russia, while asking how western philosophical thought and debates on world order are rooted in this line of thinking (PSA10).

Notwithstanding these examples of intersection, cross-regional collaborative exchange was surprisingly rare. Within our database, collaborative articles between scholars institutionally based in Russia and the west were limited to a single article in *EAS* and three in *PSA*. In terms of linguistic dominance, the picture is more complicated, not necessarily supporting wholesale the thesis of English linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992). At first glance, there was a relatively high proportion of Russian-language sources in *EAS* and *PSA* (34% and 22%, respectively), and similarly high proportions of English-language sources in *Polis* and *RW* (29% and 37%, respectively) (see Figure 1). However, almost

half of the Russian sources in both *EAS* and *PSA* were newspaper articles and government websites, serving as primary sources. While this demonstrates engagement with discourses 'out there', it highlights a relatively limited engagement with Russian-language scholarship and its conceptual or theoretical frameworks. Notably, the Russian-language articles were much more likely to cite English-language sources that provided overarching theoretical perspectives.

This builds up a complex picture of limited exchange across our sites of knowledge production, mirroring Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of centrifugal and centripetal forces that push scholars towards the adherence to national and local norms respectively (see Korotkina, 2018, p. 314). The process of internationalisation of knowledge production continues to be defined by asymmetrical power relations in citation and publishing practices, both for Area Studies and other disciplines more broadly (Romanova, 2015; Trubina et al., 2020). Tellingly, while across our data a total of 20% of articles in *EAS* and 14% in *PSA* have been authored by scholars affiliated with Russian universities and institutions, no scholars from the Euro-American space (with the exception of two 'in between' scholars immersed in two different knowledge systems) made contributions to Russian-language journals, showing little incentive to engage with and expand local discussions.

The transfer of knowledge from east to west does however take place. As shown in Table 1, within our sample there were more authors affiliated with Russian universities than any other country for both *EAS* and *PSA*. This westwards information flow should, of course, be welcomed. It represents a growing trend for authors from the postsocialist east to find a voice in English-language (international) journals (Trubina et al., 2020). Despite this positive development, this type of knowledge transfer remains mediated by western editorial practices and gatekeepers because scholars from Russian universities are rarely included on editorial boards of English-language journals. As Trubina et al. note, this 'elevates Anglophone scholars into the arbiters of what counts as good, influential scholarship, thus reproducing these countries' particular empirical concerns, methodological preferences, theoretical predilections, funding priorities and style of scholarship' (2020, pp. 639–640). As with many other relational phenomena, this renders the westward flow of knowledge somewhat of an 'in-between' process. It is particularly unfeasible for scholars in the Global East to silo their knowledge within an 'out there' or 'in here' framework. Instead, scholars who wish to find a global audience inevitably must consider the norms of western knowledge production before presenting their academic insights. This can already be seen as a form of RAS. However, it remains a largely one-way process with eastern scholars learning and adapting to western practices. Additionally, the 'in-betweenness' of these practices continues to operate at a level that is rarely acknowledged, thereby allowing it to proceed without critical reflection.

5 | THE TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL PLACEMENT OF RUSSIA

The diverse nature of scholarly topics and approaches in our database poses a gigantic challenge for our ordering of knowledge, and for our desire to reflect critically on geographies of knowledge produced 'out there' and 'in here'. Nevertheless, for us, a key issue is how Russia is situated in the selected academic discourses of our database. In other words, how do the authors depict, contextualise, and analyse Russia for their purposes of ordering knowledge? Borrowing from the
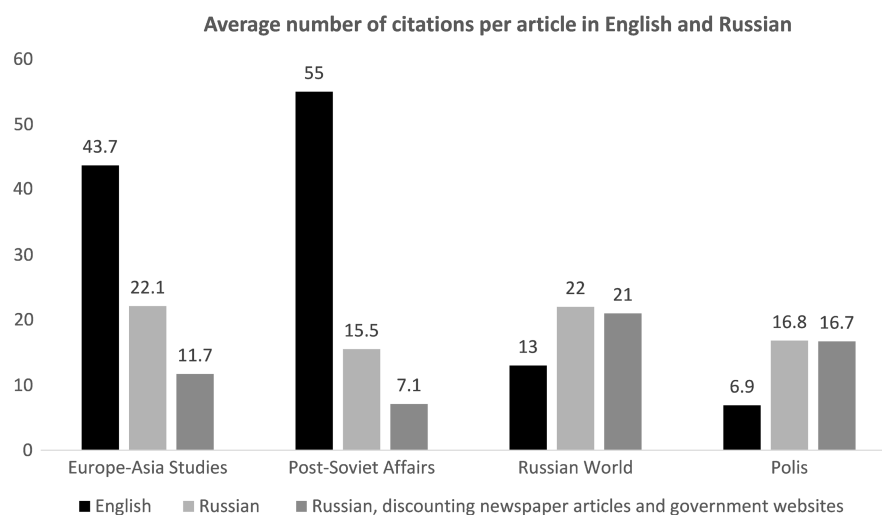

Average number of citations per article in English and Russian

FIGURE 1 Average number of citations per article in English and Russian

perspectives of critical geography, attention is attuned to the placement of Russia, not only in terms of 'objective' geography, but also in terms of wider frameworks of spatial, temporal, and cultural meanings.

In the Russian-language materials, debates about Russia's temporal development were often expressed through the combined lenses of 'modernisation' and 'civilisation'. As one author notes: 'The most important question for us is Russia's path of modernisation, and in a wider sense, Russia's path towards contemporary civilisational development' (RW K11). Russia's 'conservative turn' towards 'civilisationalism' has been well documented (Maslovskii, 2019). For many authors, civilisationalism reflects a deliberate state strategy which builds on notions of Russia's unique culture, history, and values to justify the political status quo (Romashenko, 2020). Based on Russia's unique civilisational identity, a number of Russian-language authors in our database proposed models of alternative modernity, dismissing western models of government as ill-suited to Russia and often imposed unjustly.

While this may have parallels with the critical programmes of the so-called modernity-coloniality-decoloniality school, which aims to rethink the world from local perspectives (Radcliffe, 2017, p. 329), it also poses difficult questions about political control of knowledge production in Russia. Romashenko (2020), for example, draws a clear line between the presidential administration's conservative policies and the widespread proliferation of civilisational frameworks in Russia's cultural and intellectual circles. This points towards the politicisation of Russian academic practice, especially when we consider documented examples of the Russian government's direct scrutiny, censorship, and control over academic freedoms (Kaczmarska, 2020).

We do not deny the salience of political control over the geographies of knowledge of Russian studies. We do note, however, the risk of this perspective leading to an uncritical acceptance of a geopolitical divide between 'unbiased' western scholarship and 'tainted' Russian scholarship. By employing a relational approach, we can cut through some of these issues (without ignoring them) to see areas of productive dialogue. While it is certainly true that the Russian state often seeks to control various aspects of academic practice, something that is more apparent following its invasion of Ukraine, it would be naïve not to acknowledge modalities of power and control that may occur in western contexts. Indeed, critical geographers have long outlined the link between western neoliberal university systems and 'ongoing inequalities that have deep historical roots in European imperialism' (Noxolo, 2017, p. 342).

Keeping these complexities in mind, we identified a number of differences in approaches. While civilisation appeared frequently as a topic of analysis in the English-language journals, it was never employed as an underlying explanatory factor with objective analytical purchase. For example, the argument 'that there is a specific type of "Russian" (or Eurasian) civilisation' was seen by one author as a 'conservative romantic rescheduling of the post-Soviet intellectual debate' (EAS14). This therefore reflects the general tendency of studying contemporary Russia in relative temporal isolation from various historico-cultural (civilisational) legacies. The Russian-language texts, on the other hand, often positioned the uniqueness of Russia as one of the central debates in Russian Studies. This did not mean that the civilisational approach was universally accepted. Instead, much of the scholarly discussion centred on philosophical debates concerning Russia's appropriate path of development. Indeed, one author noted how 'the hypothesis of Russian civilisational exceptionalism is far from accepted by all Russian researchers', before quoting the opinion of Inozemtsev: 'The long-standing depiction of Russia's "exceptionalism" is a serious social illness, characteristic of all sections of Russian society without exception' (RW7).

A striking difference between the two sites of knowledge production therefore centres on the conceptualisation of the past, present, and future of Russia. Interestingly, it was in the Russian-language sources wherein Russia was depicted less statically, and where there was far less consensus concerning Russia's future trajectories and forms of appropriate development. For example, notwithstanding issues of political control and censorship (Minina, 2017), numerous Russian-language articles were critical of Russia's current development path, its low levels of international integration as well as poor quality of state governance (RW6). Such negative assessments coexisted along articles that largely supported the programme of the ruling authorities. One author, for example, championed Russia's return 'to its path of unique development – searching for its roots and identity at a time when the uniqueness of European peoples is suffering from the consequences of the ideology of globalisation and democratic totalitarianism' (Polis15).

Considering the direct political oversight of Russian academia, it is interesting that the Russian-language materials presented a wider range of perspectives than the English-language journals. This perhaps reflects the wide scope of spatial and temporal associations that are discursively employed in today's Russia to construct images of the Russian self (see Omelicheva, 2016). In contrast, the English-language materials were far more uniform in applying models and frameworks of authoritarianism and regime hybridity.[3] Furthermore, they were more uniform in placing the figure of Russian President Vladimir Putin at the centre of contemporary Russian politics and society. For example, the role of institutions and organisations outside of the presidential administration was frequently downplayed, with scholars instead pointing

towards Putin's 'highly personalised authoritarian political regime' (PSA10). The 'cultural turn of the state' towards civil-isationalism (EAS4) was therefore commonly presented as Putin's personal devotion to 'protecting a mythical civilisation' (EAS4) against western liberal democratic values.

The English-language materials consequently downplayed historical and cultural factors as well as longer structural backgrounds when discussing economic, political, and societal developments in Russia. Instead, the 'Putin regime' was often seen as the central impediment for both democratic and economic growth. The clear discrepancy in how the two sites of knowledge prioritise the role of President Putin is illustrated in Figure 2: whereas the name Putin (and related grammatical derivatives) was only mentioned on average 0.69 and 1.17 times per article in *RW* and *Polis* respectively, authors in *EAS* and *PSA* mentioned Putin an average of 27.95 and 28.15 times.

These comparative data are striking. It is perhaps all too easy to point to restrictions on academic freedom in places that are characterised by obvious political censorship. At the same time, the relational perspective on geographies of knowledge helps us to reflect on institutionalised practices 'in here' that can also limit space for academic diversity in places ostensibly free from direct censorship. For example, Miriam Green (2016) explores how neoliberalism incentivises the use of 'orthodox' methods and approaches. She notes how this leads academic journals to prioritise knowledge pro-duction that meets the interests of university management rather than the general public. As a result, expectations often placed on authors such as ourselves can perpetuate the domination of certain theoretical perspectives and frameworks, while remaining blind to our own agency in the re-production of essences and ontological groupness. This clearly com-plicates the process of critical self-reflection and therefore paths towards more inclusive thinking.

6 | DISCUSSION: TOWARDS RELATIONAL AREA STUDIES

In the formulation of this research project, we have sought to achieve two main objectives. First, we have presented our empirical investigation of internal processes of knowledge production, comparing two distinct but overlapping corpuses of textual data from Russian and English-language scholarship on Russia. Second (but for us, more importantly), we are attempting to use these data to help enrich, decolonise, and rethink our own scholarly practices and (perhaps somewhat ambitiously) those of the wider discipline in which we are embedded – Area Studies.

We are not entirely critical of what Area Studies has achieved. In fact, we agree that an Area Studies programme, if well versed in localised processes, has significant potential to undermine Euro-Atlantic theoretical hegemony. For ex-ample, we have documented some of the complex relational knowledge flows, even in English-language journals, that have been produced by voices from the Global East (see also Gibson-Graham, 2004; Horschelmann & Stenning, 2008; Milutinovic, 2020). At the same time, we think that to become more inclusive and dialogical, several steps must be prac-tised more systematically among scholars contributing to Area Studies. We consequently wish to emphasise the need for a richer engagement with, and re-evaluation of, the mechanisms behind knowledges we use and produce: the back-ground properties that define acceptable academic practices; the scholarly relationships towards objects of analysis that
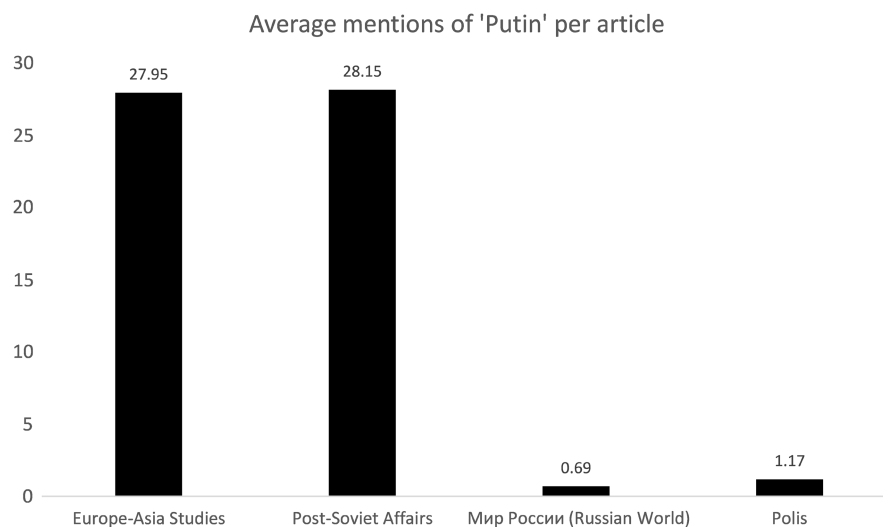
FIGURE 2 Average mentions of 'Putin' per article

are shaped by those properties; as well as the outside-in/inside-out transregional dynamics and intersections that help mould our regional knowledges.

We can perhaps sum this position up by noting that to study an area out there, one must simultaneously examine the areas in here, thereby adopting a relational, 'in-between' perspective. Political, economic, and social realities affect our institutional and disciplinary perspectives, the approaches we use, how we engage with theory, and the practices we use to structure our articles and organise our research. Previous critical studies have often argued against epistemological prescriptions, highlighting the dangers of situating research in established ideas, self-contained taxonomies, and traditions when exploring the largely unknown world (Feyerabend, 1993). It is therefore imperative to take the time to consider seriously our own positions if we wish to create a critically robust basis for Area Studies and move towards more inclusive global theorising. This does not apply solely to Russian Studies. RAS, we argue, is a critically important perspective for all forms of geographical knowledge production.

For our part, our goal to think more relationally has, we feel, helped us reflect on our own ontological situatedness as well as our material privileges as scholars currently based in the UK and Germany. For example, across the English-speaking articles of our corpus, knowledge production about Russia was commonly filtered through the framework of authoritarianism and the logic of difference from western-style liberal democracy. The tendency to use such clear-cut distinctions within self–other comparisons hinders our ability to explore more challenging understandings of the political and social landscape in Russia. If we wish to focus on the legitimate issue of authoritarian control over Russian scholarship, then we should at least consider the modalities of control and dominance that guide our own scholarly practices. These can include political and economic systems of neo-liberalism, orientalist perspectives on 'development', and colonial forms of prejudice (see Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2020; Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Based on our observations, we do not agree fully that Russia's scholarship always remains poorly placed for fruitful discussions of Russia's past, present, and future (Tlostanova, 2015, p. 50). However, there is one significant issue that we cannot sidestep. Despite our well-intentioned efforts to question the orientalising gaze of western scholarship, we admit that this presents us with a considerable challenge: how can we engage meaningfully with Russian scholarship without ignoring issues of direct politicisation and control over academic outputs in Russia? For some scholars, this is one reason to still focus on the role of authoritarianism and elite politics in contemporary Russia, as a factor that directly limits academic freedom (Dubrovskiy, 2017; Goptareva, 2015, p. 1671). Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, this question has become particularly heated, with widespread calls to cut all ties with Russian universities, and even moves to ban Russian nationals from studying in specific universities.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine thus throws up a series of complicated and morally challenging questions about how we approach Area Studies and the study of Russia in particular. It has highlighted at least three epistemological problems, which RAS can address, if conducted sensitively and honestly.

First, there can be, as perhaps reflected in our own study, a clear lack of engagement with the perspectives of scholars from different geographical sites of knowledge. RAS asks us to examine a range of geographical knowledges. Consequently, a more effective and honest approach to the study of Russia would be to search for ways to engage more rigorously with scholars from spaces bordering the Russian Federation, and to seek to interrogate the bases of our antagonistic yet entangled knowledges (an essential practice that remained beyond the scope of this paper). Second, while we need to heed the calls for more sustained study of Russian's imperialism, we should not assume that imperialism and authoritarianism can serve as explanatory frameworks for everything. By elevating one analytical category at the expense of others, we end up neglecting diversity of perspectives, rendering other processes that produce multiple Russias less significant. A critical approach to any ontological groupness that 'big categories' presume is therefore more important than ever.

This issue brings us to the third point, namely insufficient acknowledgement of our own scholarly responsibility in producing particular knowledges with very real political consequences. If we claim objective distance from the sites we study, the trend towards decolonisation can turn out, paradoxically, to be a rather colonial affair. Above, we expressed how we have been presented with orientalised images of Russia that we see as problematic. However, as we have sought to address this, we have perhaps also relied heavily on western academic notions of rationality to deconstruct our views on Russia. There is an uncomfortable paradox here – as we seek to critique western forms of scholarly hierarchy and colonialism, we can end up relying on practices that further enforce western hierarchies. In other words, there is a danger that, by focusing too heavily on the colonial practices of 'the West', we can turn a blind eye to similar manifestations of imperialism, control, and violence that occur in places like Russia.

These discussions show that, to enable greater communication between field sites and field knowledges, certainly more dialogue, comparison, scholarly reflexivity, and conceptual travel are required than afforded in this paper. We hope, however, to have contributed to the debate on the future directions of (Relational) Area Studies. This, we argue, requires greater

engagement with the epistemic transit that derives not from the 'optic of antipode' but from a 'lateral meshwork of analytics that can help to create agile links' (Boyer & Howe, 2016, p. 23). It also needs to look inwards more, into the discourses that significantly shape our approaches to, and engagement with, the field and, as a result, our academic practices. At the same time, we should simultaneously be looking outwards, towards the insights of a range of scholarly approaches.

Area Studies, we argue, should be the foremost venue for this type of vibrant, reflexive, and critical engagement. To this end, we feel that Area Studies scholars should always be striving to be operating within the field of *Relational* Area Studies, thereby helping to enrich broader discussions on the worlding of geography. RAS's focus on in-betweenness can provide a vehicle for more complex conceptualisations of how we order the world into Global Norths, Global Souths, Global Easts, and Global Wests. When, for example, we study Germany, Russia, China, Venezuela, or Nigeria, we should never assume that our knowledge is generated within a geographical vacuum. Knowledge moves in mysterious and complex ways, and RAS offers some insight into how we can capture and interrogate this relational complexity.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

1 The Global South here is understood not as a particular geographic location, but rather as places that "endured the experience of coloniality" (Mignolo, 2011, p. 185).

2 This observation is based on our own examination of online profiles and publishing records of the authors within our chosen sample.

3 Similar conclusions have been reached by Alima Bissenova and Kulshat Medeuova & Bissenova (2016, p. 37) while discussing problems related to regional research in or about Central Asia. According to them, the topics of corruption and authoritarianism have become so prevalent within global theoretical frameworks, that it is practically impossible to research any "normal" phenomena like the middle class in Kazakhstan without slipping into the typical questions: "What about corruption?" or "How do you tolerate an authoritarian regime?". As such, the authors continue, there is far less interest in writing about the already existing "modernity" in the form of developing infrastructure or electronic tax systems than about defects in the internal understanding of this modernity.

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