

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT:

Conversation with BEYOND THE POST-SOVIET

MILDA:

Thank you again all for joining us today for a conversation. And we thought that to start things off, if you could tell us a bit more about the behind the story of *Beyond the post-soviet* coming together and your structure and how does it work for you?

YULIA:

Hello, everyone. My name is Yulia and I'm one of the co-founders of the collective. We launched it in 2021 and first starting with discussions, me and Sasha. It was a coincidence how we met actually also being on a distance and not knowing each other, but sharing that interest in decolonial perspective on post-soviet studies and also starting to talk about how academia is actually denying this approach and trying to isolate the studies and what does it mean.

And then we felt that this discussion can be also brought in a broader field and that we want to discuss it collectively, including different experiences and backgrounds, and also inviting different types of knowledge to join in there. How we kick off with the first meeting in Paris... that was a hybrid meeting, and I think that we tried to keep it when possible to... to make it hybrid, meaning that we have a meeting on site somewhere and also having Zoom so people can join from different localities. And this is maybe following the question how we collaborate in the distance.

At that time it was a kind of also very fluid structure of the collective, not a kind of collective that has certain members. Therefore, to keep the collective and the space safe, we have developed several principles or values that we keep sharing and also announcing every time, especially when we do open meetings. So these are mutual care... This is a non-hierarchical structure, this collectivity and non-consensuality. They are the base of all values. And, I mean, to kind of also point and to unfold during our interview these values, we will answer collectively also to your questions and sometimes answers could be very contradictory because ... we allow ourselves to ... to make mistakes. We are not experts, but we value all the

knowledge and experience we have collected as artists, curators, cultural workers, as people as well, including memories and feelings. So this is how we kind of want to proceed once again underlying these values that we praise and invite to share.

JULIJA:

Thank you so much for your answer and then going on, the next question would be about your regional focus and about the way you decided to name yourselves. So with our programme, we chose to talk about Eastern Europe. So it was a very... not a very broad range. We were thinking about Lithuania and Ukraine and the Global East.

And your collective focusses on the post-Soviet. Although the word *beyond* points to a certain flexibility of your name and your regional focus is much wider than ours, as *beyond the post-soviet* encapsulates the extent of it. So could you talk about the process of choosing this name for your collective, especially in relation to the temporal aspect of the name? So *post* as the suffix... and do you find it useful to attribute a name to a region? Or should we maybe focus on stories, the lived experiences more than on terms?

SASHA:

You know, I think that when the group was... so the group was started more than two years ago and the title, the name of the group, was chosen at that moment. I think it's important to say that. And we were thinking, at that moment in time, about different approaches that exist to study, let's say, or to work on these regions, like post-Soviet studies, for example, or when we say post-Soviet space, which are the words that maybe are a bit too generalising. So we wanted to still to take some of these words and to see how can we encapsulate very specific experiences through them, how can we fill them with different meanings. So because we think that... so despite of course, very different experiences... we think that it's also important to reach out to many regions that where in different ways affected by Soviet colonialism and Russian imperialism and Russian colonial project because the processes were extremely intertwined and things are extremely connected inside. So maybe this is why we are also talking about, say, so-called Eastern

Europe, Central Europe, Baltic States, trans-Caucasian region, and also Central Asia... because there was... there was a lot of mobility of this colonial project and it took different faces. And it's important to see this interconnectedness. Also, it's important starting to see the links that were created through the colonial project, because in one of your questions, you're also talking about the language, for example. But there were many other things, like architecture... And this is somehow... created still some relation with this colonial influence, colonial violence and colonial trauma. So I think it's important for us to see this colonial project as a whole, also looking at very specific cases.

And maybe to answer your second question, like should we rename the region or how do we conceive our strategies around it... I think maybe this is my personal position and maybe my colleagues will add something on that, but I think it's really... we could not answer to this. I cannot answer to that. It's very specific depending on the context, because, for example, we're talking about the post-soviet or the Soviet, the word *Soviet*. It's so difficult and different to... there are so many different attitudes related to the term because the Soviet project unfolded in very different ways... in extremely violent ways in the Baltic states, for example, as military occupation, and in different ways in other regions. So I think it's very... it's up to every country of today or every community to decide how do they emancipate themselves from this and what are the right terms to use. And I saw... I think I have to say that even the word that we use *post-soviet* is also sometimes provoking debates. And we are very often talking also about it between us and with our guests.

FAINA:

Yeah, thank you, Sasha.

Hi everyone, my name is Faina. I'm an artist and I'm happy also to be there in this collective because I'm working with visual language, not words-language I would say. So for me also important to share my position... also as an artist from Uzbekistan and from Central Asia. And so... and for me, when I... when we talk about post-Soviet situation, how Sasha mentioned it before, it's a very different perspective, also from Central Asia... and I lived for six years in Moscow, so I know how it is

when you're from Uzbekistan and you're in Russia. So that's why for me, it's also important to share that being from Central Asia can be also different, not with special expectations or a special image, you know, that a lot of people have about Central Asians and the topics we wish to discuss, the expectations coming from this image being also post-Soviet.

And for me, this expression *beyond the post-soviet*... for me is a... more of a question. Can we be *beyond*? Or is the Soviet still inside? I mean like... and so it's not an answer. It's just a way to find out. And so that's why I really appreciate to be in this collective because we're not giving the answers. We're trying to find out together and there's a safe space where we can discuss and share our opinions without being... also as Yulia was saying before, without being experts. So and I'm feeling myself very good with all of these words. I mean, I don't write a text or maybe sometimes my English is not so good, but I'm feeling myself very good because we are working with different types of experience and so we respect them, I mean, this experience. So I think that is my position in this collective.

TATIANA:

I also can add about my context. I am an artist and curator from Moldova and joined the group last year. For me, it was quite important to join this group because I also, for a quite long period, worked with this post-Soviet context and made several projects connected to the resistance topic... and for me it is quite important to unite with such people. Because this is the same past, Soviet past, and it's common to us, but we have a different experience, a different context in which we lived. And it's interesting to share what we have in common and what kind of differences, for example, colonialism we have. And this is why we unite. And also for me, *post-soviet* is also thinking about how we can rethink the Soviet legacy, deconstruct it and outline new interpretations of the recent past.

SASHA:

Maybe just one last thing. I don't remember if I... if we said it at some point, but it's of course, a parallel to the post-colonial condition. So something post-soviet being related to the past, but also surviving in the present, in the language, in the mind, in body, in the soil, in the water and so on and so on.

ZOLA:

Hi, I'm Zola. I'm a cultural worker based out of Paris. And like Tatiana I joined the collective only a year ago. And of course, I agree with what Faina and Tatiana have just said. I know that for myself it's even quite difficult to explain my identity without talking about Soviet colonialism and Russian imperialism because I was born in St Petersburg to a Russian mother and to a Congolese father. And I think this union would not have happened without the Soviet influence... the power and the influence that Russian imperialism and the Soviet Union had on the African continent. So I think that and I'm also maybe starting a little bit to answer to the third question about the solidarities *beyond* and with the global context, which for me are very important. And it's one of the reasons I joined the collective because I felt that whilst using the terms *beyond* and *post* and joining the post-colonial continuum, as well as using the word *beyond* the collective acknowledged those narratives and those perspectives. And for me, it was quite important because I believe that in order to properly look through the decolonial lens, we have to look at it in an intersectional way and also look at the different ways that the so-called post-soviet space was both perceived but also acknowledged, talked about and thought about outside of the Western world.

MILDA:

Thank you very much. So we can just move into the third question then from here. So I was also thinking that *beyond* can hint to potential solidarities not limited to the post-soviet region. So maybe you can talk about how you see the region's place in the global context of the decolonial project. And if you see or experience any solidarities in your work?

YULIA:

Maybe I will start and we then all continue. I think that recently it became obvious that isolating all this knowledge and studies and long-lasting not acknowledging of this colonial form of violence happening in Soviet and Russian empire led to one of the consequences of it - full-scale invasion in Ukraine, which revealed actually lots of these stories and revealed how also this colonialism survived and was supported by Central Europe in culture, in discourse...

And I think that there already we can see how important it was to put it in a broader perspective and to acknowledge this relation and I believe that this colonialism or different forms of it happening in Central Europe, but also in Soviet and Russian empire... they're interwoven and they still kind of survived also supporting each other. And this is the process we should undergo together. Also our experience shows that bringing these topics into Central Europe and putting it in a perspective and a distance also may help European experience to be processed and deconstructed and analysed and finding relationships. Such forms of colonialism that survive, for example, in nature or in culture, when dissolving the identities, it's kind of the same pattern, the same methods that also Central Europe still apply to many countries and still not worked through.

So I think there we see big potential to work towards it together and not anymore isolating it and understanding the danger of this isolation and this marginalisation and hierarchisation of the knowledge. Because for a long time post-soviet studies or so-called post-soviet studies were kind of also hierarchised and not accepted. Like still, there are so many discussions on how you dare to apply colonial term to post-soviet territories, such different experiences there. You are under-evaluating the trauma of European colonies and people. And I think there we can already kind of reveal this nerve... how this knowledge existed and still exists and how we can work towards deconstructing this and what we can do in terms of production of this knowledge collectively and questioning and bringing also different experiences. Because also people coming from Europe that had so many imaginations about this.... and expectations and exotification... about this so-called post-soviet territories

that survived, and were kind of also supporting Russian colonial narration of the history. So we have to act transnationally, in the broader context.

SASHA:

Maybe it's important also to introduce the terms like *epistemic violence* that different regions that live a post-colonial condition experienced and continue to experience. And in this way, looking through these optics, this can also be an instrument of solidarity and collective work. And maybe also the expression *denying reality*, denying the reality of someone. Maybe around these... these concepts and around these conditions some broader solidarity can be built.

ZOLA:

I quite agree with both Yulia, Faina and Sasha on this. I also believe that in terms of the production of this knowledge, it's quite important to have a wider look because I know that for me, my research focuses on the so-called Soviet space and there are similarities in terms of the process of decolonisation between the French-speaking African countries and as well as the French Caribbean, which I mean... it was in the French Caribbean that a lot of decolonial knowledge was also produced. And it's quite important for me to look at the parallels and the similarities of going out or trying to process the fact that I evolved and I was born in a colonial society. What does it mean for me, my cultural identity, my knowledge production, and how do I work with that or around it? And I think that in creating parallels we might shed some light on things that, we might not have seen or they might not have seen, as different communities, and that is part for me, of the overall decolonial work.

TATIANA:

I also want to add to the solidarity that it's quite important because it helps us to survive in such a turbulent world that we live in. With the war in Ukraine, most of the people don't understand what's happened, what the reason was. And so for example, I was now in Armenia and worked as a cultural worker and spoke with another person who works with the decolonisation topic. And he said it's quite hard to work locally because for Armenian society it's not obvious. And for me it's quite important

also to show solidarity and to speak about this, what kind of problem we have, issues and how we can work and spread this information more widely.

JULIJA:

Yeah, there were many interesting points mentioned as well, and *epistemic violence* I think is one of them that I would like to follow up on as well with the next question. And with this program as well, we were thinking about magic, about belonging, and about fictioning, so different ways of looking at the reality and just embracing how strange it is and that there are many imposed categories that put people into violence and epistemic violence or otherwise. And I wanted to ask you, what are your strategies working against the grain and which knowledges are your main points of focus. So is it, I don't know, ancestral knowledge, embodied knowledge, academic knowledge, how do they all intertwine in your collective?

SASHA:

Yeah. The question is quite complex and I think once again there is no one answer because we are, I would say, mobilising different types of knowledge. And at the beginning we talked about this non-hierarchical principle, our approach, and it also applies to the knowledge that we involve, meaning that there is no higher knowledge, like academic knowledge, some refined knowledge, or knowledge of experts, and it can completely co-exists with some bodily experiences or memory or post-memory or also emotions or some individual narratives. And in this sense it's like driving on different speeds at the same time and involving different types of knowledge depending on the situation, I would say yes, I think this is one of the important parts of decolonial approach that we have.

Also, I think that we also share this idea of affective research, research based on affect. We're not just neutral researchers working on some isolated area of knowledge and creating some neutral knowledge. No, we are sharing this different experience and different perspectives and we're situating ourselves in relation to all these topics and we are working from the inside, where inside there are also different positions between us. Because some of us are in Western Europe, some of us are in

the region and so on and so on. So I think this is also an important part of the decolonial approach that we have.

JULIJA:

And maybe you could also share what are you researching briefly just to kind of illustrate?

YULIA:

So one of the approaches that we also have and I think it's a very important one in the context of decolonial methods and methodology is listening and hearing. This is something that we applied to several of our events. First of all, starting with the Assembly of Solidarity with Ukraine, which we designed with another collective *Radical Care* in Paris, and it was conducted in the Centre Pompidou last year.

SASHA:

La Maison de l'ours which is an artist-run space by artist Kristina Solomoukha.

YULIA:

Yes, exactly. And that was actually a place where we started our collective. So we have lots of personal ties with this collective. It was this assembly in the Centre Pompidou where we only listened to testimonies coming from artists and cultural workers from Ukraine. And it was very important to start with this listening practice and not trying to discuss or debate. It's not a time for debating. It's just the first step is trying to listen, which we feel like listening is a very active labour. This active presence practice is important one to also deconstruct these very also academic... when you... every time debate or you want to put your point of view forward.

And the next project around this listening and hearing was developed for Mudam Museum where Tatiana was present and invited. And we also have had Ukrainian and also Ukrainian cultural workers and also a philosopher from Slovenia. And I think that also kind of underlines another point, this multiplicity of voices and multiplicity of the ways the story can be narrated, which also leads us to this non-consensual way of understanding and revealing the conflicts that are still there.

And even in our naming, we are kind of reflecting this conflict every time and facing them and acknowledging them. And I think also to continue with this value of care. I would say for me personally, this process, this work, this research on different levels and in different formats is also is a form of care of the knowledge and of history... And going away from this careless narration and replication of the way history was told and how also personal and private stories were demolished and erased from that.

FAINA:

Just to add that in 2021, we organised two different types of meetings and they were also hybrid...when I was in Tashkent, in Uzbekistan... In the name of the collective, I organised the meeting. And I think it's also a type of sharing knowledge. I mean, we worked also with a local... I would say it was not an institution, but that was just a place where a lot of people can meet in Tashkent, and they are interested in the art or some of different topics like films. For me, it was important to share this perspective that I have from abroad and from Tashkent. It was also, for me, interesting to hear what people... how they react or what they think.

And there's also the type of research that we in the collective are doing. For me, it is also important when we are the collective to have this also critical view on us because we... I don't know how other members, but I have a feeling that every time we are challenging the question if we were also colonial, you know... if what we're sharing or what we're doing in different locations or when we work with other people if it's okay for them. I mean, you know, it's what's been said or what Yulia mentioned before about this care situation. So that's also a challenge for us because what if we have this knowledge and share it and it's also colonial, you know? So it's very difficult, the questions which we deal with every time or challenging them.

So that's why I was very happy when I heard about this listening situation, that we also listen and respect other opinions and experiences... So not really academic type of sharing knowledge. Yeah... And I think what we also mentioned and the tools... Instagram, so that's I think is a very cool instrument. I mean the tool to share

and, and invite people also to share their opinions and comments or their use so it's also a type of sharing knowledge.

SASHA:

I also would add that I don't think that this word really came up before, but I would say also friendship is an important tool. I mean, a tool/way of doing things because I think that in the collective we are friends, we are becoming friends, and also the people that are involved... I think it's always very personal discussions and we are involving the people... I mean, we're not inviting the people. I think that we are trying to involve them into how the events should unfold, how this programme should unfold. And it's very long-term relations, let's say. It's not just, you know, like we are coming here, we're taking this and we're putting it out there. No, we are trying to build projects together, I think it's very important to highlight this, that this is a kind of ongoing long-term work.

TATIANA:

And just to add that to work together collectively, it's important. Locally we make individual projects working with local context. But when we work together, we learn from each other, share experience and knowledge, create new knowledge together and subsequently can disseminate it locally. A project, for example, which I'm developing, the *Corridor project*, still continues till now and develops in a different perspective. And for me it's quite important to be together and to have an impact globally, maybe for our group and also locally.

MILDA:

It's really amazing to hear your tools and just your experiences because we were thinking about similar things while organising this project. And yeah, it's really great to hear your experiences, but kind of to move on to our next question, we're also interested in hearing about your relationship with institutions as a collective. So on the one hand, institutions and administering bodies render everybody legible by collecting data and the like. Well, on the other hand, it can grant legitimacy, the ability and the chance to participate in transnational events, activities and exhibitions. Could you talk about how you approach commissions and collaborations with both art and other institutions?

SASHA:

I think it's again very different from every situation. I think that when one is invited somewhere, it has to be happening on some common terms. You know, if, of course, there are opportunities to present our work together with institutions that make it much more visible and that would reach much larger audiences... and of course, there are dangers, meaning that the institution also has its own agenda. It needs maybe to fill in just some squares, you know, in their list. So I think that's what we are trying to do... We absolutely I think we agree that we do not refuse to work with institutions. It would be absurd. I think we are also all part of institution of contemporary art and others. But yeah, being just very careful and also trying to put forward... I think that what we've been doing so far is trying to put forward some long-term programmes and not just one-time events, one short event, where once again it would be a bit I'd say extractivist to put some topic on the agenda and then we move forward. So we are trying to develop these long-term ties with the institutions and also put forward educational programmes.

And also I think we use these opportunities to do the work with the institution and with the cultural workers, because every time we have many meetings with them where we also expose our position and I think we highlight the problems and some strategies that are the main strategies, mainly the politics of the institutions where they do not change or it does not incorporate this perspective of both socialist or post-Soviet countries. So I think it's very complex work.

And this year we also decided that one of the focuses of the group is to build frameworks and residency opportunities together with different institutions for artists from Ukraine. This was a, I think, deliberate and important decision because we were listening to the needs and we were also measuring the temperature in the institutions. For some of them, there is no urgency anymore, you know, because the war started, not the war, but the invasion started more than a year ago. So it's kind of normal now and blah blah blah but it's not the case. And many residencies that started 1 year ago already finishing and maybe the artists who are in Ukraine are suffering from a very bad economic condition now. So what we've been doing as a

group is to use our own networks to create these opportunity residencies, and we managed to do some of them... to create them. So I think in this case we were extremely strategic in how we work with them.

YULIA:

Also, maybe it's important to mention at this point, that sometimes it's not only institutions where we feel like we are being invited and what does it mean... how we are going to be used to train some discourses or context or to make... to legitimise those. But sometimes we also have allies that support us very gently without imposing agenda and rather kind of trying to navigate together.

And there I would like to talk about *Relais Culture Europe* that appeared last year in our collective practice. And starting with the first projects collaborating on the first almost listening session together and then starting to be kind of our allies in developing online campaign. And there I really feel and see a great potential of hearing each other and trying to navigate together. Sometimes they will... This is part of the Creative Europe, its French department. And I think this is also part of our collaboration where we feel support and also the opportunity to reach out. Having this network, a broader European network, to reach out to many agents and ears of Europe about these topics.

JULIJA:

Thank you. There are many strategies and I think, as you said, that it's situational sometimes. We could then move to the last question about languages and there are many languages that are not shared transnationally in the post-soviet space. And so to communicate cross-culturally among ourselves, we usually use English or Russian. In a way this lack of direct communication severs continuities, history of family stories and the like. And first of all, what are the main languages of use by the collective? And you also mentioned Instagram. So I want to extend into the knowledge tree that you shared on Instagram and to which anyone can contribute. Could we call it, in a way, a transnational vocabulary?

SASHA:

The official language of the collective is English. From the beginning, I would say. It's another colonial language, of course, but if we come back to the question of perspectives, sometimes what is considered a colonial tool can become in other parts of the world a tool for emancipation. Of course, Russian language is, I think... is present in the post-soviet countries because of the history, because of the education. And I think it's inevitable that it is used like, for example, French is used in the countries that were in the past French colonies and Zola could talk more about it, about the colonial writings in French, the French, Caribbean and beyond that were written in French. Yeah, but the main language of communication still remains the English language.

FAINA:

Languages, how I said before... For me, in general, language... it's a very difficult topic. I have this experience that when I talk in Russian with Central Asians, I hear the opinion that I protect my privilege. Like I don't speak Uzbek or I don't speak Kazakh or other languages with them because I speak Russian. And that's why I'm not a real Central Asian, you know. But what I say is that Russian language is not Russian. I mean, it's not. So what we can do is just to take it and talk. So, I mean, speaking Russian, it makes me no less Uzbek. So I mean, it's very difficult... also in my family. My father and mother, they talked to me just Russian because they wanted that I have no accent. And so my father never spoke with me Uzbek language. And so that's why I am not native in Uzbek. So for me now it's more important also talking about this position because a lot of people had this same experience and they're not *original* Uzbeks now.

I'm just going to the next question... When we thought about this tree of knowledge on Instagram, for us, also, it was important that not just a vocabulary from special groups can be this vocabulary. For us, it was important that everybody can put their own vocabulary. We don't try to find or to choose, 'Okay that's good, that's not good.' So we take all of the suggestions and put them for others to discuss and also to share their opinions. So for me as a member and also as an artist and an Instagram user was very important, this, I would say, interaction. Because it's also the way to... not

to do just academical sharing, like we as a collective produce knowledge and we share them on Instagram. No, we're also involved with people who follow us or not, but so they can also share their opinions. So yeah, but the language of course, for me, it's very difficult. I mean, there's an open question I would say.

SASHA:

I maybe would also add that this mixity or hybridity are important terms, maybe even values for us because we all know that every colonialism or every colonial project is afraid of mixity, is afraid of hybridity. They are looking for purity. And in this sense we're also using languages... like you see how we speak English, like we kind of do mistakes or we're... I also was thinking today that I started speaking English when I was six years old. Now it's also my language, you know, and the French is also my language. And the way I speak is mine, you know, and don't also... don't correct me sometimes, you know. And the same with Russian and I think... Faina, you're also doing the project right now where this question of language and translation how we use is really important. And Russian can be used in so many ways and it's not the same. It doesn't belong to Russia as a state, as a colonial state or its colonial project.

YULIA:

And maybe also relating to this is that the colonial vocabulary appeared also more than one year ago and was starting as a simple question that people with whom we're talking in the events they were bringing some words. And it was also partly practice of our hearing, that we were hearing each other and then trying to kind of to reveal some words or to save some words for us... to take them and to bring them forward, to reflect on them. We felt like this tree of knowledge, which we also once discussed... that it's not vertical, rather horizontal. It was kind of growing already long time and now it kind of took the form and expanded in Instagram.

TATIANA:

And just to add that it's quite organic to speak in different languages. It depends on the context and the people, how we can organize some event, so we can speak English and after we can change to Russian. The language doesn't matter but it's more about the communication.

ZOLA:

I would like to add to what Sasha said, especially about the hybridity. I know that even in very much practical ways from my experience working as a former cultural worker at a nonprofit that is called in Paris *atelier des artistes en exil*, which is a place that welcomes artists from all around the world that had to escape their country because of war or political reasons. And it was mandated by the French government in order to welcome and help Ukrainian artists in France. And we develop this very much hybrid use of English, Russian, French and Ukrainian. And I truly believe that for me, hybridity, as Sasha said, breaks the sort of colonial barriers that stood in the way of how we were taught these languages and how we want to move forward, practising them both as people, but also as cultural workers and professionals or artists. Language is being used as a tool of emancipation.

It's true that most decolonial writings, especially from the French Caribbean, it was all written in French, but we also have to put forward that those people, that wrote it, are coming from a very particular social context. They all studied in France. Some were part of the local elites coming from the Caribbean islands or the African continent. So we also have this social and political context that we have to keep in mind.

And so basically those who were making research on parallels between how to get out of a very much colonial culture and a colonial system in French-speaking African countries for instance, you have this very interesting parallel between most countries that decided to keep French and moving forward for political but for very much cultural reasons as well, because they... they wanted to build a collective economical system together that didn't work out for example. And for that they needed to use French because they wanted to do it together, because they believed that they would weigh more on the international community if they brought forward this project together. But you also have countries like Rwanda, for instance, that totally renounced the French language because of the war and the genocide that France is closely tied to within Rwanda. And only a few years ago, I believe, they entirely renounced the French language and refigured, rethought the entirety of their cultural and political systems and started shifting it slowly to the English language,

which is of course a colonial language. But it was a step away from the French continuum. And this parallel is very much interesting to observe because most countries from the so-called post-soviet space also have a different way of looking at Russian language and how to deal with it in the future.

JULIJA:

Thank you so much. Yeah, it was very, very interesting. It would be interesting to continue this talk for another hour or so.