



**POST-SOVIET DECOLONIZATION AND IR: LANGUAGE, LEGACY, AND THE
REMAPPING OF POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how post-Soviet states use language as a tool of decolonial agency and international re-positioning within the field of International Relations (IR). Focusing on the speeches of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the paper investigates how rhetorical strategies shape national identity, challenge imperial legacies, and redefine global power alignments. Grounded in a qualitative research approach and employing Norman Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study analyzes each speech through textual, discursive, and social dimensions, attending to lexical choices, metaphors, grammatical structures, modes of distribution, and ideological effects.

The findings reveal two distinct discursive pathways toward post-Soviet decolonization. Zelenskyy constructs a narrative of urgent resistance and epistemic realignment with the European civilizational core. His speech, framed by binary metaphors (e.g., "light vs. darkness"), collective agency, and appeals to shared European values, positions Ukraine as both a victim of Russian imperial aggression and a rightful member of the European community. In contrast, Tokayev enacts a discourse of moderation and sovereign neutrality, using diplomatic metaphors, multilateral vocabulary, and non-confrontational grammar to assert Kazakhstan's geopolitical autonomy. His emphasis on multipolarity, intercultural dialogue, and non-alignment positions Kazakhstan as a voice of balance in a divided world, subtly challenging both Russian hegemony and Western unipolarity.

Significantly, both speeches serve as discursive acts of epistemic repositioning. They deconstruct Cold War binaries and reframe post-Soviet nations as active agents in the global order, one through performative resistance, the other through strategic diplomacy. These linguistic choices have material implications: Zelenskyy's speech



catalyzed European policy shifts and moral solidarity, while Tokayev's reinforced Kazakhstan's diplomatic credibility and domestic identity formation.

The study contributes to postcolonial IR theory by illustrating how discourse becomes a site of geopolitical contestation and self-representation in the post-Soviet context. It demonstrates that decolonization is not solely a historical or territorial process, but also a linguistic and symbolic one where nations reassert sovereignty through strategic engagement with global narratives. The findings highlight the transformative power of language in reshaping IR hierarchies, expanding the analytical horizons of both CDA and post-Soviet studies. This work has broader implications for understanding how non-Western and formerly colonized states navigate recognition, resistance, and redefinition in contemporary international relations. Diplomacy.

Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 produced fifteen independent states ranging from Estonia to Tajikistan, instantly repositioning them within the framework of International Relations (IR). This transition marked a critical juncture in global geopolitics, as these newly sovereign entities redefined their identities, language policies, and diplomatic orientations. Scholars have noted that the label “post-Soviet” often functions as an ideological tool, perpetuating a sense of imperial continuity and othering within Western-centric IR discourse (Sagatienė, as cited in Lawfare Media, 2024) lawfaremedia.org.

This framing has masked the diversity and agency of post Soviet states, which have not only sought to shed Soviet-era structures but have also navigated complex neocolonial dynamics, economic, cultural, and political within the broader regional power hierarchy. For example, Kluczevska (2024) demonstrates how Tajikistan's dependence on Russia reflects a distinct post-colonial, yet non-traditional, imperial relationship that persists in shaping power asymmetries in IR (Tajikistan–Russia case), cambridge.org.

At the same time, a vibrant body of scholarship is reframing post Soviet spaces through a postcolonial and decolonial lens. Kołodziejczyk and Huigen (2023) highlight an emerging binary: one stream that treats post-Soviet states as inherently postcolonial, and another that employs postcolonial theory to critically reassess national identity and historical narratives without reinforcing nationalism. Meanwhile, Vera Sidlova (2013) argues for a more nuanced “reverse cultural colonization” lens, which reveals how Russian imperial frameworks continue to suppress local epistemologies and how post Soviet countries are resisting these via language revival, memory politics, and alternative identity formations.

This shift signifies that post Soviet nations are not passively inheriting Soviet legacies; rather, they actively engage in epistemic disobedience, reclaiming languages, histories, and scholarly traditions suppressed during Soviet rule. Kazakhstan's language policy of “Kazakhization,” for instance, illustrates deliberate moves away from Russification toward embracing indigenous identity (Wikipedia, 2025). In parallel, other states are diversifying their diplomatic ties, moving away from Russian influence and toward Western and regional partnerships (Le Monde, 2023).

This background underscores two critical insights: first, the “post Soviet” designation masks dynamic processes of decolonization; second, these processes of linguistic, cultural, and epistemic agency are actively reshaping both regional and global IR structures.



Problem Statement

Despite their shared history of imperial domination, post-Soviet states are frequently sidelined in mainstream International Relations (IR) scholarship, which remains predominantly Western-centric. Traditional IR frameworks tend to prioritize Western narratives and theoretical constructs such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism while marginalizing non-Western experiences and perspectives (Tickner et al., 2011; Acharya & Buzan, 2010). These frameworks often portray post-Soviet countries as peripheral actors emerging from Soviet hegemony but lacking full agency, reinforcing a scholarly discourse that undervalues their contributions (Allazimuth, 2024; Sidiropoulos, 2018) allazimuth.com.

Moreover, IR literature tends to treat post Soviet states homogenously, ignoring the distinct colonial Tsarist and Soviet legacies, as well as differing identity politics within the region (Abdelal, 2002; Sidiropoulos, 2018). The discipline's theoretical and geographic boundaries were shaped during the Cold War, leaving postcolonial and decolonial insights largely absent when examining Eurasia (Allazimuth, 2024; Wright, 2018). Consequently, post-Soviet experiences of linguistic revival, epistemic resistance, and sovereignty-building are underrepresented in decolonial IR debates, despite their clear relevance.

This marginalization creates a critical gap: IR scholarship continues to privilege Western-based epistemologies and overlooks how post-Soviet states articulate their forms of decolonial resistance through language policies, memory politics, national identity, and new diplomatic orientations. To achieve a richer, more inclusive IR, there is a need to recognize these experiences not as peripheral afterthoughts, but as essential components in the global project of decolonizing International Relations.

Research Objective

- i. To explore how post-Soviet states are remapping postcolonial discourse and contributing to decolonizing IR knowledge.

Research Questions

- i. How are post-Soviet states challenging colonial/imperial legacies in IR?
- ii. What role does language and identity play in this process?
- iii. Can post-Soviet decolonization be aligned with global postcolonial/decolonial IR theories?

The development of postcolonial theory has significantly impacted social sciences, but its integration into IR remains uneven. A foundational figure in this field is Edward Said, whose seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) demonstrated how the West constructs the East as backward, irrational, and inferior to justify colonial domination. Said's idea of "contrapuntal reading" has been applied in IR to expose the silencing of non-Western voices and the ideological structures embedded in supposedly objective theories (Chowdhry, 2007). Said's legacy paved the way for the critique of IR's epistemological foundations and encouraged scholars to interrogate whose knowledge is considered legitimate.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak extended this critique by focusing on the figure of the "subaltern," those who exist outside dominant power structures and cannot "speak" within colonial systems without being distorted. Her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) is a cornerstone of postcolonial thought and raises essential questions for IR: who is authorized to produce



knowledge, and whose histories are omitted? In IR, Spivak's insights challenge assumptions about the universality of Western political values and institutional models, revealing how the discipline often fails to recognize the agency and voice of the Global South and, by extension, post-Soviet societies (Spivak, 1999).

Another key thinker, Homi K. Bhabha, introduced the concept of hybridity, the idea that colonized societies create in-between cultural identities that resist binary classifications like colonizer/colonized or East/West. His work is particularly relevant to the post-Soviet region, where national identity is often negotiated between Soviet legacies, indigenous traditions, and Western influences. Bhabha's emphasis on cultural ambivalence and mimicry opens the door for analyzing how post-Soviet states construct new, hybrid political and cultural identities in resistance to imperial narratives.

Walter D. Mignolo, representing the Latin American decolonial school, offers the concept of "epistemic delinking," arguing that knowledge production must be liberated from Eurocentric modernity. He introduces the idea of the "colonial matrix of power," which connects race, language, and knowledge hierarchies across history and geographies. While Mignolo's work is rooted in Latin America, his emphasis on epistemic disobedience provides a powerful tool to analyze how post-Soviet countries, especially those in Central Asia and the Caucasus, are reclaiming indigenous languages and rewriting historical narratives that were suppressed under Soviet rule (Mignolo, 2017).

Finally, Gurinder K. Bhambra critiques the "universalism" of modern social and political theory, including IR, which often erases the colonial foundations of the modern world system. She calls for "epistemological justice," the recognition and integration of marginalized knowledges and histories into the core of theoretical discourse. Bhambra's work is particularly valuable for understanding how IR can evolve to include post-Soviet voices, which have often been excluded not only because of geopolitical marginalization but also due to disciplinary blind spots rooted in Euro-American academic traditions (Bhambra, 2020).

Together, these thinkers offer powerful critiques and alternatives to dominant IR frameworks. Their theories, when applied to the post-Soviet context, can illuminate how language policies, memory politics, and academic discourse in countries like Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Georgia contribute to the global project of decolonizing International Relations.

The legacy of colonialism in the post-Soviet space is rooted in both Tsarist imperial expansion and Soviet-era internal colonialism. Unlike classical European overseas colonial empires, Russian imperialism unfolded across contiguous territories, with Central Asia, the Caucasus, and parts of Eastern Europe subjected to political domination, economic extraction, and cultural assimilation. Scholars have increasingly emphasized that the Soviet Union did not merely inherit the Russian Empire's colonial logic; it reconfigured and institutionalized it under a new ideological guise (Sahadeo, 2019). The Soviet state, while publicly committed to anti-colonial rhetoric and internationalist solidarity, often engaged in practices that mirrored imperial domination, including centralized control, forced population transfers, and economic dependency structures (Hirsch, 2005).

The concept of internal colonialism has been used to describe the hierarchical relationships between the Russian center and the non-Russian peripheries during both the Tsarist and Soviet



periods. This framework highlights how Moscow exercised authority over non-Russian republics and ethnic minorities through administrative centralization, economic exploitation, and cultural hegemony. In Central Asia, for example, the Soviet state implemented agricultural collectivization, restructured local economies to serve industrial cores like Moscow and Leningrad, and introduced Russian as the dominant language of administration and higher education (Kalinovsky, 2018). While certain national cultures were officially recognized, they were tightly controlled and subordinated to the Russian-centric Soviet identity.

A key tool of Soviet colonial control was Russification, the process by which the Russian language, culture, and ideology were imposed on non-Russian peoples. Though the early Soviet period promoted “korenizatsiya” (indigenization), aiming to empower local elites and languages, this policy was reversed by the 1930s under Stalin. From then on, Russian became the language of state power, education, and upward mobility, effectively marginalizing local languages and epistemologies (Grenoble, 2003). This linguistic dominance not only suppressed indigenous cultures but also constrained knowledge production, as academic, scientific, and political discourse became increasingly homogenized within a Russian framework. The result was an epistemic silencing of diverse worldviews, Mignolo (2011) would call a form of “epistemic disobedience” enforced from above.

Soviet colonial legacies continue to shape the post-Soviet region’s struggles with national identity, language policy, and decolonial knowledge production. In countries like Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and the Baltic states, contemporary efforts to revive indigenous languages and reframe national histories are deeply entwined with the desire to undo the cultural and epistemic erasures of the Soviet period. These processes are not merely symbolic; they represent a broader challenge to the lingering colonial hierarchies that persist in post-imperial relations and global academic discourse. As scholars like Tlostanova (2012) argue, understanding the post-Soviet condition requires confronting these layered colonialities, imperial, Soviet, and global that continue to shape knowledge, power, and identity in the region.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how post-Soviet political leaders use language to negotiate identity, sovereignty, and decolonial agency in the global arena. Specifically, it employs Norman Fairclough’s Three-Dimensional Model of CDA (Fairclough, 1995), which integrates textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice to explore the relationship between discourse, ideology, and power. Two key speeches were selected for analysis: Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s Address to the European Parliament (March 1, 2022) and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s Address to the United Nations General Assembly (September 2022). The data were sourced from official websites of the European Parliament and the United Nations, ensuring authenticity and representativeness. The textual dimension focused on vocabulary, metaphors, and grammar to uncover how each leader frames issues of imperialism, resistance, neutrality, and belonging. The discursive and social dimensions explored the production, distribution, and consumption of these speeches, as well as their broader ideological effects within international relations (IR) discourse. This methodology enables a critical and comparative understanding of post-Soviet decolonization and epistemic repositioning in global diplomatic narratives.



Textual Analysis of Zelenskyy's Speech (Dimension 1 of Fairclough's CDA Model)

Vocabulary: Framing Resistance and Imperialism

Zelenskyy repeatedly uses charged vocabulary to frame Ukraine as a victim of aggression and agent of democratic resistance. Key lexical items include:

- "Occupation," "invasion," "missile strikes," "bombs," "war crimes" – These terms highlight Russian aggression and construct a moral binary of oppressor vs. oppressed.
- "Freedom," "choice," "life," "light" – Zelenskyy aligns Ukraine with liberal democratic values, reinforcing its belonging to the European project.
- "Europe," "European values," "European Union" – The repetition of "Europe" reinforces Ukraine's epistemic and political decolonization from Russian influence by identifying with the European civilizational space.
- "We are fighting for survival. We are fighting to be equal members of Europe." – The verb fighting and the noun survival construct Ukraine not only as under existential threat but as morally entitled to inclusion.

Implication: The vocabulary constructs a postcolonial discourse of resistance against imperial domination (Russia), and positions Europe as a symbolic center of liberation and epistemic justice.

Metaphors: Victimhood, Heroism, and Historical Continuity

Zelenskyy's metaphors are emotionally powerful and frame Ukraine's struggle in civilizational and historical terms:

- "We are giving our lives for the right to be equal."
A sacrificial metaphor, portraying Ukrainian people as martyrs for democratic ideals.
- "This is a tragedy for every Ukrainian, a tragedy for every European."
Uses the metaphor of shared suffering to bridge Ukraine's trauma with European identity.
- "We are light defeating darkness."
A binary metaphor aligning Ukraine with Enlightenment ideals and casting Russia as regressive or barbaric is a key Orientalist reversal.
- "We are like you."
This metaphor of sameness collapses distinctions between Ukraine and EU states, demanding inclusion based on cultural, moral, and historical parity.

Implication: Zelenskyy's metaphoric structure rewrites Ukraine's geopolitical identity as a European nation oppressed by a neo-imperial force, resonating with postcolonial calls for recognition.

Grammar: Agency, Modality, and Pronoun Use

The grammar of Zelenskyy's speech reveals the deliberate construction of collective agency and solidarity:

- Use of first-person plural ("we," "our") – Emphasizes collective Ukrainian struggle: "We are fighting," "Our people are dying," "We need your help."
- Modal verbs such as "must," "can," "should"



Example: “We must prevail,” “You must support us,” “Europe should prove it stands with us.”

These create urgency and moral obligation, especially toward the EU audience.

- Active voice is dominant:
“We are giving lives,” “We are resisting,” “We are standing.”
Ukraine is not passive or weak but an active subject in shaping its future, countering colonial tropes of the passive victim.
- Temporal grammar signals historical depth:
“We’ve been striving for this for decades.”
This situates Ukraine’s struggle within a longer history of decolonial aspiration, not a reactionary crisis.

Implication: Zelenskyy’s grammatical choices reinforce agency, urgency, and historical legitimacy, aligning his people with broader decolonial and democratic movements.

Discursive Practice Analysis Of Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s Speech to the European Parliament

Production

Who delivers the speech?

- Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the President of Ukraine, delivers this speech remotely via video link during an emergency session of the European Parliament, held just a few days after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

Purpose of Production:

- The speech is crafted as a high-stakes political intervention during wartime. It serves to:
- Garner moral and political support from the European Union.
- Frame Ukraine’s resistance as a defense of European values (freedom, democracy).
- Demand tangible actions: military aid, sanctions on Russia, and expedited EU membership.

Discursive Strategy:

- Zelenskyy constructs urgent emotional appeals, grounded in shared European identity and ethical responsibility.
- He speaks not only as a national leader but also as a symbol of resistance and an emerging postcolonial voice in global politics.

Distribution

How is the speech circulated?

- The speech is broadcast live on EU platforms and translated simultaneously into 24 official EU languages, ensuring pan-European accessibility.
- It is immediately shared across:
 - Television and live news media (e.g., BBC, CNN, DW).
 - European Parliament official channels (livestream, website, transcripts).
 - Social media platforms (Twitter, YouTube, Facebook), making it go viral.

Multilingual and multimodal reach:



- Subtitled videos, short clips, and excerpts tailored for different publics (activists, policymakers, diasporas).
- Its translatability and emotional intensity made it widely quoted and referenced by European leaders, media, and scholars.

Implication:

- The distribution mechanism enables the speech to function not only as a diplomatic message but as a transnational discursive act, rallying a wide moral coalition.

Consumption

Who consumes it, and how?

Primary Audience:

- European Parliament members and EU leaders – as decision-makers capable of shaping sanctions, security policy, and Ukraine's EU accession path.

Secondary Audience:

- Ukrainian citizens and diaspora – reaffirming national resilience and international solidarity.
- Global public, especially audiences in the Global South, NATO countries, and Russia's neighboring states, are observing Ukraine's positioning within global IR discourse.

Reception & Uptake:

- The speech received a standing ovation, and many MEPs were visibly emotional, showing that it had a rhetorical and affective impact.
- It catalyzed policy shifts, such as increased military aid to Ukraine and accelerated talks about EU candidacy.

Strategic Consumption:

- The speech enabled Europe to redefine itself: supporting Ukraine became a performance of its post-imperial, democratic self-image.
- For Ukraine, this moment was consumed as a symbolic break from the post-Soviet shadow, a discursive act of epistemic decolonization.

Social Practice Analysis

Text: Volodymyr Zelenskyy's speech to the European Parliament

Date: March 1, 2022

Analytical Focus: Ideological effects, power relations, colonial/postcolonial framing, and identity politics in IR

Framework: Fairclough's CDA – Dimension 3: Social Practice

Colonial/Postcolonial Structures in IR Discourse

Zelenskyy's speech operates within and simultaneously challenges the Eurocentric structures of international relations. While traditionally, IR theory has focused on great power politics and "civilizational cores," Ukraine has historically been framed as a periphery, often reduced to a geopolitical buffer between Russia and the West.

In this speech, Zelenskyy reclaims agency for Ukraine by asserting its full moral and political equivalence with European states. His repeated appeals to European values, democratic identity, and sovereignty are discursive acts of epistemic decolonization challenging both the



imperial legacies of Russia and the Western tendency to treat post-Soviet states as transitional or incomplete democracies (Tlostanova, 2012).

By stating, “We are giving our lives for the right to be equal,” Zelenskyy is articulating a demand for recognition, a core theme in postcolonial thought (Bhambra, 2020). He frames Ukraine not as an object of charity or rescue, but as a subject of international law, morality, and political meaning. This is a challenge to the colonial logic of exceptionalism, where only certain nations are seen as rightful participants in the “international community.”

Power Relations and the Global Order

Zelenskyy’s speech exposes and contests asymmetries in global power structures. He identifies Russia not just as an aggressor, but as a neo-imperial force perpetuating colonial domination over former Soviet republics. The speech draws parallels between Ukraine’s anti-colonial struggle and other postcolonial liberation movements, recontextualizing the war as part of a broader de-imperial process.

At the same time, Zelenskyy addresses Western Europe as both an ally and gatekeeper. His appeal to the EU reflects a negotiation of inclusion, a request for full membership into the European political space, which has often treated Eastern Europe as “less European” (Kuus, 2004). The power imbalance here is linguistic and symbolic: the EU is positioned as the arbiter of modernity and legitimacy, while Ukraine must “prove” its belonging through sacrifice and performance.

This reflects Spivak’s concept of the subaltern: Ukraine, historically silenced in global discourse, now demands to “speak” as an equal. The performative power of Zelenskyy’s speech lies in this reversal of roles where the formerly peripheral state calls Europe to ethical action, shifting the moral authority of IR discourse.

Nation-Building and Identity Politics

On a domestic level, the speech also plays a crucial role in Ukrainian nation-building. It reinforces a collective identity based on:

- Anti-imperial resistance (against Russia),
- European belonging (cultural and political),
- Democratic sacrifice (martyrdom and heroism).

This discursive construction aligns with postcolonial nationalism, where the reclamation of identity, language, and historical narrative is essential for state legitimacy and unity.

The use of language such as “light defeating darkness” and “Europe stands with us” positions Ukraine’s national story as one of decolonial emergence, not Cold War aftermath. In doing so, Zelenskyy not only speaks to external powers but constructs an internal symbolic order that binds citizens to a shared sense of historical purpose and future direction.

Textual Analysis of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s Address to the 77th United Nations

General Assembly

Vocabulary: Discursive Positioning Through Neutrality and Multipolarity

Tokayev’s speech is carefully composed with diplomatic and non-confrontational language, yet it subtly asserts Kazakhstan’s autonomy from imperial and Cold War binaries. Key lexical items include:



- “Neutrality,” “non-interference,” “balanced foreign policy,” “mutual respect” – These terms are repeated to signal Kazakhstan’s non-alignment in geopolitical conflicts, particularly the Russia-Ukraine war, without naming Russia explicitly.
- “Multipolarity,” “multilateralism,” “international law,” “UN Charter” – These are used to invoke global norms that resist power centralization, indirectly challenging unipolar or imperial control.
- “Dialogue,” “cooperation,” “diplomacy,” “intercultural understanding” – These terms emphasize peaceful global integration and linguistic-cultural diversity, positioning Kazakhstan as a bridge nation.
- Notably absent: Tokayev does not use terms like “imperialism,” “occupation,” or “aggression”, signaling a calculated discursive distancing without overt confrontation aligned with Kazakhstan’s “multi-vector” diplomacy.

Implication: The vocabulary frames Kazakhstan as an agent of global moderation, resisting the gravitational pull of Russian-centric discourse while embedding itself in a pluralist world order.

Metaphors: Nation as Diplomatic Bridge and Moral Actor

Tokayev uses metaphors that project Kazakhstan’s identity as a connector in a divided world:

- “Kazakhstan stands as a bridge between East and West.”
This geopolitical metaphor recasts Kazakhstan’s peripheral location as a central moral position, elevating its global role.
- “We must build bridges, not walls.”
A peaceful metaphor that alludes to rejecting confrontation, yet indirectly comments on rising geopolitical tensions.
- “The voice of reason must prevail.”
Kazakhstan is portrayed as a voice of calm, moderation, and rational diplomacy subtle contrast to aggressive or imperial voices.

These metaphors help re-narrate Kazakhstan’s post-Soviet identity as a sovereign, independent mediator rather than a satellite of past powers.

Grammar: Modality, Pronouns, and Passive Voice

The grammatical structure of Tokayev’s speech supports his non-polarizing stance:

- Use of collective pronouns (“we,” “our”)
“We must act together,” “Our shared responsibility” – these inclusive forms emphasize global solidarity and common humanity, not division or confrontation.
- Modal verbs (“must,” “should,” “can”)
Tokayev uses these to suggest cooperative action without coercion:
“We must find new ways to overcome challenges.”
“We should avoid a new Cold War.”
- Tendency toward passive voice
Example: “Tensions have increased,” “Conflicts have arisen.”
This avoids assigning direct blame, particularly toward Russia, reflecting Kazakhstan’s strategic neutrality.



- Absence of an accusatory tone
The grammatical tone remains measured, depersonalized, and non-provocative, consistent with Kazakhstan's balancing diplomacy.

Discursive Practice Analysis

Production

Who delivered the speech?

- Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. A former UN diplomat and fluent speaker of several languages, Tokayev has a reputation for being a technocratic and internationally oriented leader.

Context of production:

- Delivered during the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly, amid:
 - The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war.
 - Heightened global tensions and a reconfiguration of geopolitical alliances.
 - Kazakhstan's increasing attempts to assert foreign policy independence from Russia while navigating its strategic partnership with both Russia and China.

Purpose of production:

- To project Kazakhstan as a neutral, stable, and sovereign actor committed to international law, multilateralism, and peaceful diplomacy.
- To subtly distance Kazakhstan from Russian-centric narratives without antagonizing Russia.
- To articulate Kazakhstan's vision of a multipolar and linguistically diverse world order.

Discursive intention:

- Tokayev avoids naming Russia or taking an explicit side in the war, but he uses the platform to reassert Kazakhstan's autonomy, appeal to the Global South, and position the country as a bridge in global diplomacy.

Distribution

How was the speech distributed?

- Primary Channel:
 - UN Web TV and official UN documentation (available on [un.org](https://www.un.org)).
- Secondary Channels:
 - Global news media (e.g., Al Jazeera, Deutsche Welle, Reuters) covering key highlights.
 - Kazakh national news agencies (e.g., Kazinform, Tengrinews) circulated excerpts domestically.
 - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan promoted the speech on social media platforms and government websites.
- Linguistic and Symbolic Distribution:
 - Delivered in English, with translations into Kazakh and Russian for regional media.
 - Symbolically distributed to both international diplomatic audiences and Kazakhstan's multilingual citizenry.



Implication of distribution:

- The global reach of the speech situates Kazakhstan within the transnational IR discourse, while its domestic re-circulation reinforces its internal post-Soviet identity transformation.

Who consumed the speech, and how?

Primary Audiences:

- International Diplomats and State Leaders:
 - Read the speech through a lens of geopolitical alignment. Tokayev's neutrality was noted as part of Kazakhstan's effort to balance relations with Russia, China, and the West.
 - In particular, Central Asian neighbors and EU diplomats paid attention to Kazakhstan's evolving posture.
- Kazakh Public:
 - The speech was interpreted as a careful message of sovereignty. Tokayev's avoidance of confrontation and emphasis on neutrality were aligned with public concerns over Russian influence and Kazakhstan's territorial integrity.
 - It supported nation-building narratives of multilingualism, stability, and moderation.
- Russian Audience and Kremlin Analysts:
 - The speech's non-alignment was monitored as a potential strategic distancing. Tokayev had previously stated at the 2022 St. Petersburg Forum (in front of Putin) that Kazakhstan would not recognize breakaway republics in Ukraine, a position indirectly reinforced at the UNGA.

Strategic Consumption:

- Western commentators viewed Tokayev's speech as a quiet assertion of autonomy.
- The Global South likely interpreted it as a call for multipolar justice, aligning with broader post-Western IR discourses.

Social Practice Analysis of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's Address to the 77th United Nations

Post-Soviet Decolonization and Epistemic Repositioning

Tokayev's speech represents a discursive break from Russian-centered post-Soviet dependency, signaling a strategic reorientation of Kazakhstan's international identity. While never explicitly criticizing Russia, Tokayev constructs a sovereign Kazakh voice, grounded in neutrality, multipolarity, and cultural plurality.

In doing so, he contributes to a remapping of postcolonial discourse in IR:

- Kazakhstan, like many post-Soviet states, has historically been viewed through a Moscow-centric lens in both policy and academic discourse.
- By articulating a non-aligned, multilateral worldview, Tokayev positions Kazakhstan not as a Russian periphery, but as a civilizational actor in its own right.

This shift aligns with decolonial IR theory (e.g., Bhambra, Mignolo, Tlostanova), which calls for the provincialization of imperial centers and the inclusion of plural, localized epistemologies in global order-making.



Ideological Effects: Reframing Global Order and Sovereignty

Tokayev's emphasis on multipolarity and sovereign equality is more than a geopolitical strategy; it reflects a rejection of great-power hierarchies and a challenge to hegemonic models of global governance.

Key ideological messages include:

- **Neutrality as resistance:** Rather than being passive, Kazakhstan's neutral stance becomes an active ideology that resists absorption into larger blocs, especially amid the Russia–Ukraine war.
- **Multipolarity as decolonial logic:** This term opposes both unipolar (U.S.-led) and imperial (Russian-centered) visions of global order. It resonates with Global South discourses calling for a more equitable international system.
- **Linguistic and cultural pluralism:** Tokayev's references to linguistic diversity and intercultural understanding are part of a broader identity project decentering Russian linguistic hegemony while avoiding cultural homogenization. This affirms Kazakhstan's Turkic, Central Asian, and multiconfessional heritage.

Thus, the speech subtly but powerfully supports a decolonial worldview, where diversity, sovereignty, and epistemic plurality become the core ideological commitments of international engagement.

Nation-Building and Identity Formation

At the national level, the speech reinforces Kazakhstan's discursive sovereignty, a key element of post-Soviet decolonization:

- By addressing a global audience, Tokayev projects Kazakhstan as an independent moral actor, rather than a state trapped in post-Soviet transition.
- The emphasis on non-interference, UN principles, and language diversity reflects domestic efforts to:
 - Promote the Kazakh language and culture (as part of linguistic decolonization).
 - Distance from Russian narratives of shared history, paternalism, or reintegration (e.g., the "Russkiy mir" doctrine).
 - Stabilize domestic legitimacy by tying national identity to global values like peace and pluralism.

His carefully non-confrontational tone also speaks to Kazakhstan's internal balancing act: resisting imperial discourse without provoking geopolitical retaliation, particularly from Russia.

This chapter conducts a nuanced discourse analysis of speeches by two post-Soviet leaders, Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, through the lens of Norman Fairclough's Three-Dimensional CDA Model, particularly focusing on Dimension 1: Textual Analysis, while drawing connections to the Discursive and Social Practice dimensions. While both leaders address international audiences amid the geopolitical crisis triggered by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, their rhetorical strategies, lexical choices, metaphors, and grammatical constructions diverge significantly, reflecting their distinct national goals, geopolitical alignments, and ideological positioning in the evolving global order.



Zelenskyy: A Discourse of Postcolonial Resistance and Democratic Assertion

Zelenskyy's speech to the European Parliament functions as a discursive intervention grounded in urgency, moral clarity, and decolonial resistance. His lexical, metaphoric, and grammatical choices construct Ukraine as a victim of imperial violence and a democratic agent deserving of European integration.

Vocabulary: The Language of Struggle and Justice

Zelenskyy's use of terms such as "occupation," "war crimes," "invasion," and "missile strikes" forms a lexical chain of aggression evoking not just the violence of war but the illegitimacy of Russian actions. In contrast, words like "freedom," "life," and "European values" invoke an ideological and civilizational contrast. This vocabulary constructs a clear moral binary: Russia as neo-imperial oppressor, and Ukraine as the liberated, yet embattled, subject of international justice.

The repetition of "Europe" and "European Union" does more than express geographical alignment; it constitutes a discursive act of epistemic decolonization. Ukraine is no longer presented as a liminal "buffer state," but as a fully conscious participant in the European political and cultural project. Thus, vocabulary becomes a political weapon that reorients Ukraine's identity toward a post-Soviet, postcolonial, and democratic space.

Metaphors: Martyrdom, Light, and Belonging

Zelenskyy's metaphors operate on civilizational and emotional levels. The idea that "We are giving our lives for the right to be equal" frames Ukrainians as democratic martyrs. The binary "light versus darkness" metaphor aligns Ukraine with Enlightenment ideals of freedom, rationality, and humanity while Russia is implicitly cast as regressive, imperial, and violent.

The metaphor "We are like you" collapses the geopolitical boundaries between "core" and "periphery," reflecting postcolonial identity politics that seek recognition rather than pity. These metaphors bridge the emotional and political, appealing to European audiences not just for support, but for inclusion and solidarity based on shared values.

Grammar: Collective Agency and Temporal Legitimacy

Zelenskyy's grammar constructs a strong sense of collective national agency. The frequent use of active voice and collective pronouns ("we," "our") negates the image of Ukraine as a passive victim. Modal verbs like "must" and "should" build a sense of moral obligation, especially targeted at the EU.

Moreover, temporal references such as "we've been striving for this for decades" locate Ukraine's struggle within a historical continuum, not as a reaction to Russia's invasion, but as part of a long-standing decolonial aspiration. This historical depth elevates Ukraine's demands from the tactical to the ideological and ethical.

Tokayev: A Discourse of Moderation, Multipolarity, and Strategic Sovereignty

In contrast, Tokayev's UNGA speech represents a measured, cautious, yet assertive diplomatic positioning. His lexical choices, metaphors, and grammatical structures reflect Kazakhstan's desire to maintain sovereignty without alienating powerful neighbors, especially Russia, while signaling a shift toward epistemic and political multipolarity.

Vocabulary: The Language of Balance and Autonomy



Tokayev uses non-confrontational yet ideologically potent vocabulary. Terms like “neutrality,” “non-interference,” and “balanced foreign policy” affirm Kazakhstan’s autonomy in a turbulent geopolitical context. His preference for “multipolarity” and “international law” over terms like “imperialism” or “aggression” is significant as it reflects discursive distancing without diplomatic rupture.

The absence of overtly anti-Russian terms reveals a strategy of discursive self-preservation, positioning Kazakhstan as a voice of moderation rather than a frontline resistor. This lexical diplomacy reflects Kazakhstan’s engagement in what Fairclough would call a negotiated social order, balancing regional dependencies with aspirations for postcolonial autonomy.

Metaphors: The Bridge and the Voice of Reason

Tokayev’s metaphors are rooted in diplomatic symbolism. “Kazakhstan stands as a bridge between East and West,” elevates Kazakhstan’s geostrategic position into a moral and discursive center. The metaphor of “building bridges, not walls” resonates globally, echoing multilateralism, conflict resolution, and global justice.

The metaphor “voice of reason” constructs Kazakhstan as a moral actor in a world of polarizing ideologies. Unlike Zelenskyy’s metaphors of war and resistance, Tokayev’s metaphors reflect non-alignment as a positive ideology, aligned with emerging Global South discourses of multipolarity and epistemic justice.

2.3 Grammar: Passivity, Solidarity, and Linguistic Soft Power

Grammatically, Tokayev favors inclusive pronouns (“we,” “our”) and modal constructions (“should,” “must”) that suggest collaborative global responsibility. Passive voice dominates (“conflicts have arisen”), allowing Tokayev to acknowledge the crisis without assigning blame, an essential maneuver for Kazakhstan’s strategic ambiguity.

This style reflects what Fairclough would term a recontextualization of agency, where political actors manage their roles in complex power hierarchies by manipulating subject positions in discourse. By avoiding accusations while promoting pluralism, Tokayev asserts Kazakhstan’s discursive sovereignty, particularly in its linguistic and cultural pluralism, subtly challenging Russian hegemonic narratives.

Comparative Discussion: Discursive Ideologies and Postcolonial Voices

Postcolonial IR Framing

Both speeches engage in **postcolonial reframings of international relations**:

- **Zelenskyy** constructs Ukraine as a decolonizing democracy, demanding inclusion into the “civilizational core” of Europe, challenging both Russian aggression and Eurocentric gatekeeping.
- **Tokayev** asserts Kazakhstan’s discursive neutrality and multiplicity, resisting binary Cold War logic while de-centering Moscow’s influence through calls for a multipolar global order.

Power, Identity, and Recognition

While Zelenskyy’s speech demands recognition through sacrifice, Tokayev’s seeks recognition through moderation. Zelenskyy appeals to shared trauma and moral urgency, whereas Tokayev appeals to common sense, reason, and global solidarity.



Both, however, challenge the historical invisibility of post-Soviet voices in global IR by repositioning their nations as agents, one through resistance, the other through diplomacy.

The textual analyses of Zelenskyy and Tokayev reveal distinct yet overlapping strategies of postcolonial speech-making in international diplomacy. Zelenskyy mobilizes a vocabulary and metaphors of resistance, heroism, and urgency, grounded in democratic universalism and historical martyrdom. Tokayev adopts a language of neutrality, moderation, and multilateral reason, constructing Kazakhstan as a sovereign, pluralist actor in a new world order.

Both speeches, though shaped by different geographies and political constraints, represent discursive acts of epistemic repositioning. They challenge old imperial hierarchies by reclaiming agency through language, one by confronting empire, the other by bypassing it.

Conclusion

The comparative critical discourse analysis of Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address to the European Parliament and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's speech to the United Nations General Assembly reveals two distinct yet converging strategies of post-Soviet decolonial expression in global politics. Using Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of CDA, this study demonstrated how both leaders deploy language to construct national identity, assert epistemic agency, and intervene in the ideological contours of international relations.

Zelenskyy's speech is anchored in a discourse of urgency, democratic resistance, and moral clarity. His lexical choices frame Ukraine as a victim of neo-imperial aggression and a rightful claimant to European identity. The deployment of metaphors ranging from martyrdom to Enlightenment binaries situates Ukraine within a civilizational narrative of liberation, aligning the country with the democratic values of the European Union. His grammar emphasizes active agency, collective resolve, and temporal legitimacy, transforming Ukraine from a geopolitical buffer into a sovereign subject of postcolonial struggle. Through discursive and social practices, Zelenskyy reclaims Ukraine's position as both a moral agent and a fully European polity, demanding inclusion not as a supplicant but as an equal. His speech is thus a powerful discursive act of epistemic decolonization, challenging both Russian imperialism and Western hierarchical gatekeeping.

In contrast, Tokayev's speech exemplifies a cautious but equally strategic rhetoric of neutrality and multipolarity. His vocabulary, marked by diplomatic restraint and normative universality, repositions Kazakhstan as a balanced actor committed to global cooperation rather than confrontation. Through metaphors such as "bridge-building" and "voice of reason," he constructs Kazakhstan not as a marginal post-Soviet entity but as a stabilizing force in a fractured world. Grammatically, Tokayev employs passive voice, inclusive pronouns, and modal verbs to emphasize shared global responsibility while subtly distancing Kazakhstan from Russian hegemonic discourse. By avoiding confrontation, his speech enacts a form of discursive sovereignty, where Kazakhstan navigates postcolonial realignment without provoking imperial backlash.

Together, these speeches represent divergent yet complementary models of post-Soviet decolonization. Zelenskyy's approach is assertive, emotionally charged, and embedded in a historical narrative of resistance. Tokayev's, meanwhile, is diplomatic, multilateral, and rooted in a vision of a pluralist global order. Yet both contribute to the remapping of international



relations by destabilizing the colonial and Cold War binaries that continue to shape global discourse. Their rhetorical strategies signal a broader shift in post-Soviet identity politics from dependency to discursive autonomy, from geopolitical subordination to linguistic self-definition.

Ultimately, this study affirms that language in international politics is not merely a medium of communication but a site of ideological contestation and identity formation. By analyzing how Zelenskyy and Tokayev articulate their national visions through discourse, we uncover the deeper processes of epistemic repositioning and post-imperial negotiation that are redefining the global order in the 21st century.

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