

# From Collective Trauma To Collective Healing

A trauma-informed approach to civil society development in Russia (2025)

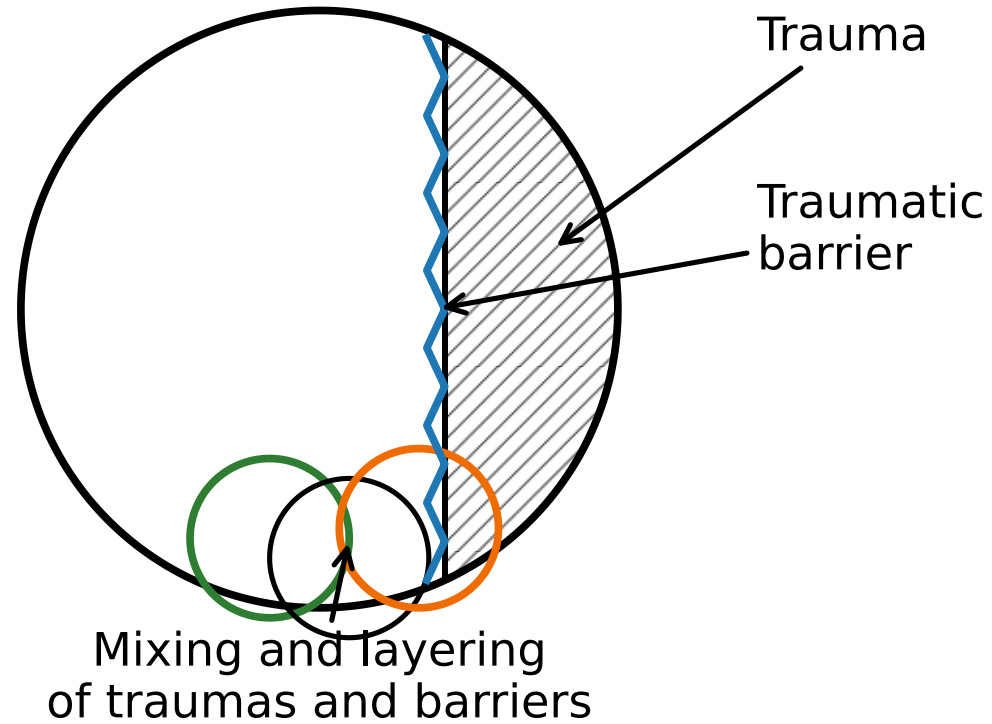
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# Anna Dobrovolskaya

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- Human rights defender from Russia
- Facilitator of peace & reconciliation dialogues (Ukraine–Russia, 2016–2021)
- Human rights educator,
- Former CEO, Memorial Human Rights Center (Moscow)
- Leading the work on “Deimperialisation”.

# Trauma and traumatic dissociation



# Psychological trauma: common consequences

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- Helplessness and powerlessness
- Loss of trust
- Emotional numbing / feeling “frozen”
- Survivor guilt
- Intrusions and flashbacks
- Avoidance
- Hyperarousal (heightened reactivity)

# Transgenerational trauma

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- Large-group identity (shared narratives of “who we are”)
- “Chosen trauma” (term suggested by Vamik Volkan)
- Intergenerational transmission / “invisible loyalty”
- “Anniversary syndrome” (term suggested by Anne Ancelin Schützenberger)

# Chosen traumas in Russia & the post-Soviet space

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- Soviet state terror and repression (e.g., Great Terror, deportations, dekulakization),
- World War II,
- Dissolution of the USSR and the 1990s (wars, economic shock, crime, terrorist attacks).

# After 1991: different ways of narrating the past

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## Many post-Soviet states

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, most post-Soviet countries (unlike Russia) could clearly separate the roles of victim and aggressor: *“We suffered under the Soviet regime, but it is gone.”*

## Russia

For Russians, this distinction was much harder to make for several reasons. As a result, many Russians remain caught at a crossroads: *we suffered under the regime*, yet we also became the heirs of the Soviet Union and are expected to take responsibility for its past crimes.

# Mnemonic security and anxiety (by Georgy Kassianov)

## Ontological security

A sense of stability and protection of the collective Self — the identity of a social group or state.

## Mnemonic security

Stability and functionality of historical memory as a part of collective identity (social/cultural/collective memory).

## Mnemonic (Ontological) anxiety

A feeling of threat to the foundations of the collective Self — in this case, collective memory and historical identity.

It may emerge naturally as a reaction to oppression, aggression, or abuse — and it can also be deliberately cultivated by political, cultural, and social agents.



# Processing trauma requires resources

## With resources

Support & knowledge



Capacity to face a difficult past



Ontological security can grow

## With limited resources

Low trust and fragmented ties



Limited capacity to engage



Ontological & mnemonic anxiety rise

# Protection-seeking under insecurity

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*“When physical and ontological insecurity rise, people often seek protection from the “strongest” actor — the state — not because it is trusted, but because alternatives feel even less reliable.”*

# 2014 and 2022: the gap widens

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- Annexation of Crimea (2014) and the full-scale invasion (2022) intensified polarization.
- The gap widened between those who can engage with the “inconvenient past” and those who cannot.
- For many, mnemonic anxiety rises; for some, working with history can increase security.

# From trauma to healing: what helps and what can be done?

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“Be everything the State is not”, Bring people resources to deal with collective trauma

- Restore agency and subjectivity of people,
  - Focus on regional, individual, small-scale instead of the large-scale greatness,
  - Rebuild trust: safe spaces, horizontal ties, dialogue
  - Work with memory: naming harm, acknowledging roles, plural narratives,
  - Strengthen support systems: psychosocial support, education, community networks,
  - Focusing on “transforming oneself” instead of “correction of another”,
  - Peer-to-peer instead of top-down approach
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# What we do in the field of “Deimperialisation”

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“Are there really no Starbacks in Israel?

Where can I get a nice pumpkin spice latte?”

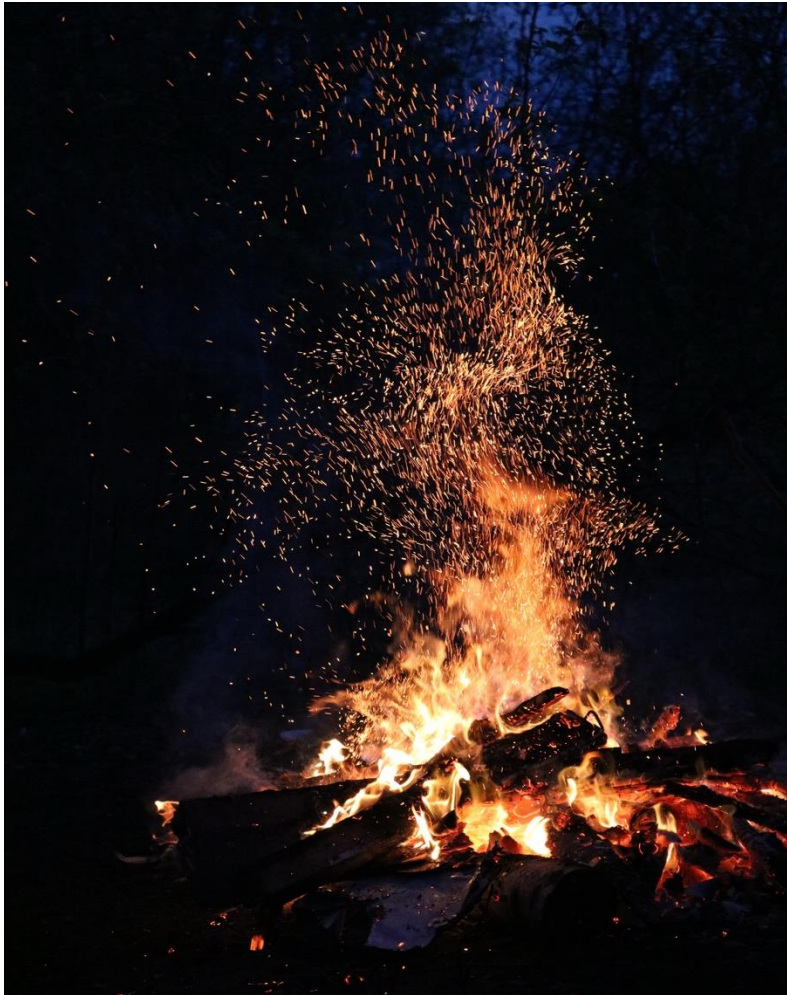
**“They speak Russian  
anyway there, why  
bother...”**

“Why should we say “В  
Украине”, it is against the  
rules of Russian language...”

**“You know, how  
lucky you are...”**

**“But we have so much of common  
history, we are the same”**

# What is imperialism/”имперскость”



By **Imperiality** (“Имперскость”) we mean not just the state policy of Russia, but also the ideas of superiority, “rightness,” common history, “brotherly nations” and other mythologemes unreflected by Russians, including those who consider themselves democrats and human rights activists.

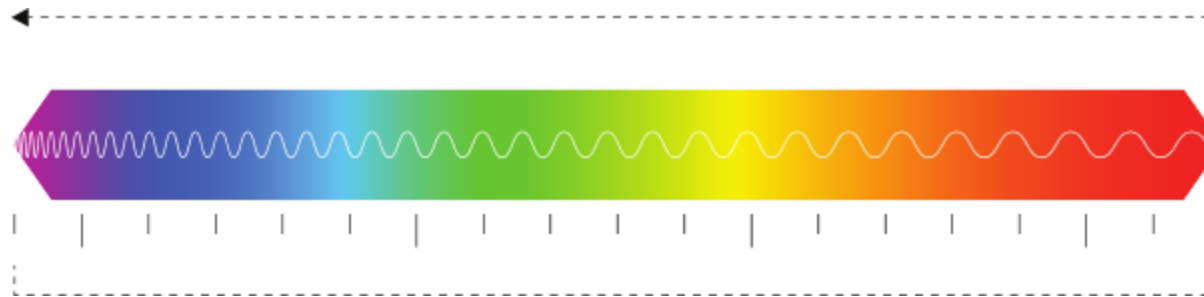
It can be compared with smoldering fire. The state deliberately plays with matches, but the wood is there anyway.

# Imperiality as a spectrum

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It would have been much easier to say that there are “bad imperialists” and “good liberals”, but unfortunately it is not true.

Imperiality is a spectrum — and any moment each of us can be on a different parts of this spectrum.



# What does an Empire provide its supporters

- A sense of self-worth, importance and influence, a sense of pride, elitism and superiority, picturing oneself as good.
- Sense of belonging and security, as a prevention of fear of being excluded, losing privileges.
- Belonging to the majority, to a strong community, which guarantees security and a place in history.
- Feeling of importance – “We defend traditional values, the entire civilization, without us everything will collapse”.
- Ideas of chosenness, greatness, uniqueness, “special way”.
- The opportunity to return / restore influence on processes and decisions, a return to big geopolitics, a demonstration that the country should be taken into consideration.
- Positive image of yourself and the group as part of the great Russian culture.



# What do we do?

- Education and dialogue through deimperialization workshops.
- Awareness-raising through the web-site and social media.
- Networking and development of the ideas through hackathon and small-scale projects

All while continuing the discussion with experts and various stakeholders in the format of this research and beyond

## What don't we do?

We do not discuss scenarios for the future “dissolution of Russia”

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# Download the report

Deimperialisation: concept,  
practices, approaches



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