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# University of Toronto education project risks reinforcing Russian disinformation: Marcus Kolga in the National Post

The Kremlin seeks to marginalize and delegitimize nations once colonized by the U.S.S.R., including Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia and Ukraine.

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By Marcus Kolga, July 4, 2025

Ignorance of Soviet Russia's violently repressive imperialist history and the uncritical adoption of language that echoes modern Kremlin disinformation has landed the University of Toronto's education faculty in hot water.

The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) — which offers graduate degrees in teaching — is currently leading an

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once colonized by the Soviet Union, including Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia and Ukraine

The fallout is sparking diplomatic concern from all three Baltic embassies, which have formally expressed their concerns to the university.

Titled “[Post-Soviet Canadian Diaspora Youth and Their Families](#),” the project claims to explore the integration experiences of youth whose families came to Canada from countries colonized and oppressed by Soviet Russia. While its stated intent may indeed be to foster a deeper understanding of these communities, the project’s language and conceptual framing are historically inaccurate, politically insensitive, and risk reinforcing harmful Kremlin-aligned stereotypes about the very groups it aims to study.

By lumping together all nations once occupied by Soviet Russia into a single “post-Soviet” identity, the project risks distorting the unique histories, cultures and political experiences of Canadians who are of Baltic and Ukrainian heritage, as well as all nations that were violently subjected to Soviet cultural annihilation. Worse, this framing unintentionally echoes Russian propaganda efforts that seek to blur the line between occupier and occupied, casting doubt on the legitimacy of these nations.

The project [defines](#) the Soviet Union as “formerly the largest country in the world,” and a “multinational and multicultural country ... experimenting (with) communist ideology.” This portrayal omits critical context about the violent and repressive nature of Soviet colonization. There is no mention of the mass deportations, forced famines or repression that defined millions of lives under Soviet Russian rule.

Particularly disturbing is the project’s inclusion of a map that depicts Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as part of the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, most North American textbooks marked these nations differently to denote their illegal occupation. The [map](#) used by OISE more closely resembles those found in Soviet schoolbooks, presenting occupation as full annexation and thereby indirectly legitimizing Russia’s imperial conquest.

While this may seem like a simple and innocent error, it reflects a deeper failure to recognize that the Baltic nations didn’t just “transition to different, non-communist forms of statehood” in 1991, as the project claims. These were independent nations illegally invaded and annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, a pattern Russia repeated with its 2014 occupation of Crimea. Their reassertion of independence in 1991 was not the birth of new states, but the restoration of sovereign ones whose continuity Canada rightly recognized. Then-prime minister Brian Mulroney was the first G7 leader to formally re-establish diplomatic ties with the restored Baltic governments.

This key fact in Canadian foreign policy is ignored. As then-prime minister Justin Trudeau [stated](#) in 2016: “Canada never recognized the Soviet Union’s occupation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and always supported their struggle to restore independence during decades of Soviet occupation.”

Former Lithuanian foreign minister Gabrielius Landsbergis [recently put it plainly](#): “Lithuania never joined the U.S.S.R. Moscow illegally occupied our territory, so we resisted until we restored our independence, and the Red Army went back home. We’re not ‘post-Soviet.’” A better description, he said, would be “never-Soviet.”

Vladimir Putin’s regime has made this distortion of Russia’s imperial history — and the manipulation of the terms used to describe it — a central pillar of its foreign policy. These distortions are used to justify aggression against Ukraine and to

undermining the sovereignty of the Baltic states. Examining Soviet rule as a benign “multicultural experiment” and labelling

formerly occupied nations as “post-Soviet” risks legitimizing the very disinformation that fuels Kremlin imperialism. In both education and information warfare, the accuracy of terminology is critically important. Words matter.

The project’s blanket characterization of Canadian communities as “post-Soviet populations” is not only inaccurate, it’s deeply offensive. My nephew, born in Estonia in the early 2000s to an Estonian-Canadian father and now studying in Canada, is not “post-Soviet.” Neither are the tens of thousands of Canadians of Baltic, Ukrainian, Georgian or Central Asian heritage whose families were displaced, terrorized and brutalized by Soviet Russian occupation. This kind of labelling reeks of Western academic chauvinism. It erases the lived trauma of colonization and flattens survivors and their descendants into a vague, ahistorical category — stripping them of agency, dignity and identity.

Most troublingly, this project is federally funded through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). In response to criticism from the Lithuanian Embassy, SSHRC President Ted Hewitt defended the project on grounds of “academic freedom.” But academic freedom does not extend to legitimizing historical falsehoods, especially those that harm communities or align with authoritarian propaganda.

The University of Toronto must acknowledge and apologize for the flaws in this project and not double down on them. In a letter responding to concerns raised by Lithuania’s Ambassador to Canada, Egidijus Meilūnas, OISE Vice-Dean Creso Sá claimed that the “primary aim” of the project is to “deepen understanding” of diaspora communities. This is a laudable goal. But it cannot be achieved by distorting historical truths or marginalizing the very communities the project claims to “understand.”

OISE and SSHRC should instead engage directly with affected communities and experts to develop research that accurately reflects the complex legacy of Soviet colonization and celebrates the resilience of those who resisted it. The contributions of Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Ukrainian and other diaspora groups in Canada should be recognized, not distorted by false generalizations aligned with Kremlin narratives.

Canada has long stood with communities who fled Soviet terror and fought for independence. As a nation that champions sovereignty and freedom, we have a duty to resist careless academic framing that distorts this history and risks misleading future generations.

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Source: National Post