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PAX POST-SOVIETICA? THE FINAL END OF POST-SOVIETNESS

ABSTRACT

This article argues that use of the terms 'post-Soviet states' or 'post-Soviet region' does more to obscure than to explain anything. Although these terms have become anachronistic and misleading as they suggest a group of countries that still have much in common, they are still used because the area is traditionally and erroneously perceived as a certain whole with shared rules. The disintegration of this territory that has been visible since 1991 is no surprise but indicates a return to the situation before the Russian Empire's expansion and colonization efforts. A process of restoration of historically great macroregions is taking place in the area: Eastern Europe, the Southern Caucasus, and Central Asia, each of which has a different cultural and civilizational identity, resulting in profound differences in their political and economic systems along with the pluralization of the influences of international actors. Despite Russian attempts to curb the territory's political, economic, and social disintegration, it has proved unstoppable and is being accelerated by Russian policy. Moscow's once hegemonic position in the region is becoming a thing of the past. Russia is no longer an attractive partner as it has become not a source of modernization, ideas, and technologies, but of problems and a threat to security and stability.

KEYWORDS:

post-Soviet area, post-colonialism, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Eastern Europe

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In many media discussions and academic discourse on the Russian aggression against Ukraine, this country is referred to as a 'post-Soviet state'. Similar terms are used for Belarus, Moldova, and the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia, but they are used much less frequently to describe the Baltic states or even contemporary Russia. For some reason, journalists and researchers think that the use of expressions such as 'post-Soviet states' or 'post-Soviet region' is still justified more than three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In this article, I will try to show that using these terms today does more to obscure than to explain anything, and that they have become artificial and anachronistic. They are used because, firstly, there is no better alternative common description of the territory that once comprised the Soviet state; secondly, the area is traditionally and erroneously perceived as a certain whole with shared rules and still much in common. The question is, though, whether one term is needed to describe an extremely diverse territory comprising 15 countries with a combined area of over 22 million sq. km, especially as history shows that the area which the Russian Empire, followed by the Soviet Union, attempted to unify was always more divided than united.

A RETURN TO HISTORICAL MACROREGIONS

Let us then begin with not the present but the past. Without showing the historical determinants, it will be impossible to understand the current political, economic, or social situation. Never in history did this territory comprise a uniform area; it always had various cultures, religions, and political traditions as a result of belonging to various civilizational circles. All the lands to which the current 'post-Soviet' concept refer became united within the Russian Empire only in the late nineteenth century. Moreover, the period when various regions belonged to it was fundamentally different. The lands of left-bank Ukraine were taken by Russia in the second half of the seventeenth century. Estonia joined the Russian Empire in the early eighteenth century and was thus part of it much longer than, for example, the North and South Caucasus and Central Asia, which were conquered in the nineteenth century. And yet the term 'post-Soviet' is used to refer to Estonia considerably less often. The Russian expansion, which happened, among other factors, because the country was more developed than the peoples it conquered, lasted until the late nineteenth century, when the Russian army captured

the lands of today's Turkmenistan (1881–1884) and Gorno-Badakhshan (1895), now part of Tajikistan.

The Russian Empire was a colonial state, and, like any colonial construct, it was artificial. Despite its efforts, it never managed to create an effective cement to bind this extremely diverse region. Throughout its existence, Tsarist Russia comprised entirely different lands, whose standardization, including in the linguistic sphere, was unsuccessful. The western part of the Russian state was historically part of the European circles of civilization, although Latin and Orthodox influences blended there. The Caucasus region, which has a longer tradition of statehood than Russia, was influenced by the Ottoman Empire and Persia and was therefore affected by the tradition of Eastern Christianity and the culture of Islam. Vast Central Asia, meanwhile, was dominated by Islamic civilization, and until the twentieth century much of it was inhabited by nomadic peoples.

The entry of these vastly disparate regions into the Soviet Union after 1917 was the result of violence, while the attempts of Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians and Azeris to establish independent states ended in failure as they were conquered by the Bolsheviks. They were aware that strong national identities were their greatest enemy, and Lenin therefore recommended "taking the most care towards the holdover of national sentiments in the countries oppressed the longest", in order to instrumentally exploit national movements to assure the stability of the Soviet state.[1] Yet this 'national experiment' was abandoned in the 1930s, as Moscow decided that Bolshevik rule was already sufficiently consolidated. It was replaced by mass repressions against nationalist and liberating movements, or those at least aspiring to remain culturally distinct. These were supposed to make the Soviet Union uniform and to consolidate the various nations, with the Russian language and culture binding them together.

However, several decades of attempts to unify and integrate the area and create a *homo Sovieticus* did not succeed. Both before 1917 and after 1991, the region was diverse in linguistic, culture, religious and social terms. Finally, long-term efforts and mass repressions never produced a uniform identity there. It appears that the custom of speaking about 'post-Soviet countries' largely results from the earlier 'sin' whereby the history of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union were written as the history of Russians and the Russian state, completely ignoring its ethnic, historical and cultural diversity. In fact, Russia and the Soviet Union were a multinational state in which ethnic Russians comprised roughly half of the population, a fact that until recently has tended to be ignored in Western historiographies.

1 Józef Czapski, *Na nieludzkiej ziemi* (Kraków: Znak, 2001), p. 213.

Incidentally, this was a broader problem of the perception of the West, which was unable to discern that the USSR was not a monolith. This was summed up well by Vladimir Bukovsky, a Soviet writer and dissident, who in the late 1970s noted that "the West calls us all 'Russians', from Moldavians to Eskimos".[2]

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the nations comprising it were to various degrees ready to build their own statehoods. Let us emphasize again that for most of its history this area was composed of various regions, therefore its disintegration not a surprise but rather a return to the period before Russian rule.

It was Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, which even in the Soviet period were perceived as the most European part of the USSR – sometimes described as 'the western Soviet Union' – that were the quickest to extract themselves. The process of their integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions proceeded remarkably smoothly, and in 2004 the three Baltic states joined the European Union and NATO. Today they remain strongly incorporated into the Western political, economic and social sphere. They have been successful in creating stable democratic institutions, rule of law, and buoyant economies, stifling social ethnic conflicts arising from the large Russian minorities in Latvia and Estonia. As a result, the Baltic states are less often included in the term 'post-Soviet region' and will only be mentioned below where the context requires.

The situation is more complex in Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, the three states of the South Caucasus, and the five Central Asian ones. It was they – rather than Russia – that began to be referred to as 'post-Soviet countries', which indicates the numerous supposed similarities between them. Below I will try to show that, despite some things that they do have in common, there are many more differences than there are commonalities between these states and regions, and these disparities are only becoming deeper with each passing year.

FROM DEMOCRACY TO TOTALITARIANISM

More than three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, increasing diversity can be seen among the post-Soviet states in terms of their political systems. After 1991, the term 'post-Soviet' was used to describe countries with similar systems that found themselves in the process of transformation from totalitarianism to democracy. In fact, the definition

2 Vladimir Bukovsky, *To Build a Castle: My Life as a Dissenter* (London: Deutsch, 1978), p. 52.

of this term became inapplicable immediately as the political systems of the states emerging from the ashes of the Soviet state soon differed and gradually became more distant. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia very soon and without much fuss became stable democratic systems, as confirmed by Euro-Atlantic integration. The states of Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova) and the Southern Caucasus (Armenia, Georgia) sought in the 1990s – with varying degrees of success – to build democracies. Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states, with their distinct political tradition and culture, from the beginning of their independence consolidated authoritarian systems which also began to evolve with time.

Four states that were once part of the Soviet Union can currently be called democracies: Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia. Although their political systems vary and each has its own distinguishing features, they have in common regular alternation of power, extensive civil liberties, and free media. At the same time, their biggest weakness is the lack of independent institutions and occasional attempts by some politicians to imitate democratic procedures, leading to the appearance of elements of authoritarianism. Consequently, these states regularly undergo periods of political upheaval, as exemplified by the Orange Revolution of 2003/2004 and the Revolution of Dignity of 2013/2014 in Ukraine, the mass protests in 2009 and 2015/2016 in Moldova, the Rose Revolution of 2003 and protests in 2019/2020 in Georgia, and the 2018 protests in Armenia.

Despite the recurring instabilities, these countries' civil societies and political pluralism have proved sufficiently strong to halt the regression of democracy. Their experience shows how difficult the process of building stable democratic systems is after leaving a totalitarian period. Despite these caveats, one can observe gradual progress in the reforming and strengthening of their political systems. In the case of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, this has been bolstered by their association agreements with the EU, which are an important plan for extensive modernization, as well as their aspirations for European integration. Realistically, however, one must concede that these countries will need a long time to build stable and efficient political systems (in the case of Ukraine and, partly, Armenia, this is further complicated by the ongoing conflicts), but it is also unlikely that they will see a return of authoritarian tendencies and abandonment of democracy.

All the other countries have authoritarian political systems – the most widespread system type in the post-Soviet space. Yet they, too, exhibit rather significant differences. The command model of government in Turkmenistan – with its complete lack of opposition, civil liberties, free media, limited opportunities for foreign travel and controlled internet

– can be called a totalitarian state. Similar tendencies have been evident recently in Belarus (especially since August 2020) and Russia (particularly since February 2022), which were previously regarded as authoritarian states with a monopolistic role of the presidential office, rigged elections, and an extremely limited role for the opposition (only outside of parliament) and civil society. The regression towards rapid development of totalitarian elements is mainly manifested in the elimination of any centres of political power that pose a genuine or potential threat to these two regimes, eradication of all independent media, attempts to limit internet freedom, closure of the majority of NGOs, and adoption of a series of legal changes *de facto* resulting in censorship and loss of freedom of speech. One such example is the introduction of long prison sentences for calling the Russian aggression against Ukraine a 'war'. In the near future, barring an – unlikely – internal crisis and resultant breakdown of Putin and Lukashenko's regimes, there is nothing to suggest that the Belarusian and Russian societies might force any change. It is also important to note that Belarusians and Russians have fundamentally different value systems, despite the similarities of their political regimes. More than 50% of Belarusian citizens aged 18–45 believe that Western-style democracy is the best political system, while less than 25% of Russians aged 18–39 are of the same view.[3] This study shows that the current attitudes of Belarusians are influenced by their different tradition, as the Belarusian lands used to be part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This was also confirmed by the demands for freedom expressed by Belarusian society after the rigged presidential elections in August 2020.

Numerous similarities notwithstanding, the political system in Kazakhstan differs from the Russian and Belarusian regimes. Paradoxically, despite the authoritarian framework, it is characterized by more pluralism, debate, and islands of freedom. Even in the later years of President Nursultan Nazarbayev's rule, he attempted to reconstruct the system and streamline state institutions. Despite the outbreak of the most serious crisis in the history of Kazakh statehood in January 2022, his successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, seems to be continuing these changes with the aim of stabilizing the state in its current authoritarian 'corset' and ultimately securing limited democratization. Although the future of this process remains open, even the limited freedoms in Kazakhstan set it apart from the rest of the Central Asian region. Whereas the situation in Kyrgyzstan

3 John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toal, and Kristin Bakke, 'Is Belarus in the midst of a generational upheaval?', *Global Voices*, 17 September 2020 <https://globalvoices.org/2020/09/17/is-belarus-in-the-midst-of-a-generational-upheaval/> [accessed 12 July 2022]; Levada-Center, 'Kakoj dolžna byt' Rossija v predstavlenii rossijan?', Levada Analytical Center, 10 September 2021 <https://www.levada.ru/2021/09/10/kakoj-dolzhna-byt-rossiya-v-predstavlenii-rossiyan/> [accessed 2 July 2022].

is similar, it is much better than in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which are governed by repressive authoritarian regimes. Since 2016, when Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power, the Uzbek political system has been showing signs of liberalization and certain political reforms, yet these do not change the essence of the political system. This is in contrast to Tajikistan, ruled since 1992 by Emomali Rahmon, where the situation has regressed in recent years.

The conclusion we can draw from this brief outline of the political systems in the post-Soviet area is that although the most common model is still authoritarianism of various degrees of repressiveness – or, in certain cases, developed or developing totalitarianism – there is also a knot of countries with democratic systems, even if these still have various burdens and defects. Furthermore, the case of Belarus shows a society that has matured to democratization, but whose aspirations are stifled by Lukashenko's Kremlin-dependent regime.

ALIENATION FROM RUSSIA

Another factor that differentiates post-Soviet states is the ongoing reorientation of their foreign policy. After 1991, Russia sought to maintain political, economic, and other ties with the newly formed states in an effort to preserve its influence in an area that Moscow had traditionally considered its natural sphere of interest. The instrument that was to facilitate this was the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), set up at the same time as the collapse of the Soviet Union. This organization was initially joined – either more or less formally – by all the countries except Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, which simultaneously cut all ties with Moscow.

The CIS soon proved to be not so much – as the Kremlin envisaged – a reintegration instrument as an organization facilitating a relatively 'civilized divorce' and mitigating certain disputes between countries. The individual post-Soviet states preferred to build sovereign foreign policies, diversify their external partners, and avoid dependence on Russia. An exception was the free trade area maintained within the CIS, which at first brought significant benefits to the member states. However, only Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the new reintegration organization set up by Russia in 2015. Yet, the EEU is relatively ineffective and remains a far from efficient implementation of the Russian political objectives of establishing a closely integrated structure resembling the European Union. The Kremlin also

failed because it distanced Kyiv from the new organization, one of whose aims had been to attract Ukraine to the integration project with Russia.

The passing years have brought a weakening of Russian influences in the territory of the former USSR, while the post-Soviet states have diversified their foreign policies, leading to an increased impact of players from outside the region. This process has taken place fastest in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, which opted for integration with the European Union and, in the first two cases, also NATO, which became their key priority and influenced their domestic policy. This also had the support of the majority of society in these countries, most visibly in Ukraine, where approval of integration with Euro-Atlantic structures after the full-scale Russian aggression of 2022 reached 85–90%, and less so in Moldova, where it is just over 50%. In June 2022, Kyiv and Chisinau received official EU candidate country status. This was not awarded to Tbilisi, however, owing to problems with human rights compliance and democratic principles. At the same time, although the ruling Georgian Dream party follows a moderately pro-Russian line, Georgian society remains enthusiastic towards European integration.

An entirely different foreign policy is pursued by Belarus, whose leader Alexander Lukashenko, unchanged since 1994, from the outset favoured a close relationship with Russia, although as late as 2020 he was still trying to maintain a space for dialogue and cooperation with the West. The pacified protests following the rigged presidential elections, support for Russian aggression in Ukraine, and Western sanctions have ensured that the level of Minsk's dependence on Moscow is the greatest since 1991 and will not change as long as the current regime remains in place.

Belarus is an exception, however, as none of the other post-Soviet states has a foreign policy so strongly oriented towards Russia, thus Belarusian sovereignty is very limited. Armenia, which continues to be dependent on Moscow in terms of security owing to the ongoing conflict with Azerbaijan, retains the option to develop relations with other partners, including the West. Yet Yerevan remains aware that the unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and frozen relations with Baku and Ankara consign it to the role of Russian vassal and prevents any economic development. This is the reason for the negotiations with Azerbaijan and Turkey that have been visible in recent months and could ultimately lead to a turning point that might result in reduced dependence on Russia. Azerbaijan, meanwhile, is showing increasing boldness in demonstrating an assertive policy towards Moscow – doing so under the patronage of Turkey, which has become an important actor in Baku – while also demonstrating ambitions in Central Asia.

In the Central Asian region too, important changes have been taking place in the last two decades or so, manifested in declining Russian influence and increased economic influence from China. Although it seemed that the intervention of Collective Security Treaty Organisation forces under the aegis of Russia in Kazakhstan in January 2022 would herald a major development of Moscow's political influence, all signs suggest that the war in Ukraine has reversed this process. The Kazakhs see Russian policy as a threat to the territorial integrity of their own state, leading to a desire to develop cooperation with other Central Asian states as well as creating opportunities for an increase in Western influence, including the EU. It is worth noting that Kazakhstan declared that it would abide by the Western sanctions placed on Russia, refused to recognize the para-states in the Donbas, and is gradually making its historical policy increasingly critical of the Soviet and Russian legacy. Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, despite retaining many interests related to their ties with Russia (economic exchange, economic migration), are also distancing themselves, openly or less so, from the Kremlin. Against this background, neutral Turkmenistan stands out: it is pursuing a policy of isolationism and feels more confident in relations with Moscow owing to the lack of a shared border and independence in the export of Turkmen energy resources.

The processes of alienation of the post-Soviet states from Russia that have been taking place in recent years, despite the Kremlin's efforts to stop them, have only accelerated since Russia's aggression in Ukraine. The war has not only fundamentally changed the Ukrainian state and society; it has also had far-reaching consequences for the entire former Soviet Union, only increasing the desire for distance from Russia. Moscow still holds major instruments for influencing its former provinces (military, energy-related, transit, access to the Russian labour market), but how much it will be able to use them is unclear. The future of Russian influence will largely depend on the result of the war. A Russian defeat would lead to further disintegration of its influence in other regions. The only exceptions are Lukashenko's vassalized regime in Belarus and – to a large extent – Armenia, which is dependent on Russia in terms of security. On top of this comes other states' influences in the former Soviet Union region: the EU in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia; Turkey in Azerbaijan; and China, the West and Turkey in Central Asia. The result is an increasing and seemingly unstoppable 'pluralization'of the international arena. The Russian Federation's loss of its status as an attractive partner and model of modernization has contributed to the current situation. Recurrent neoimperialist tendencies in Moscow's policy and the domination of the force factor have contributed to the post-Soviet states' successful search for alternative partners.

FROM CAPITALISM TO A CENTRALLY PLANNED ECONOMY

The area that once formed the Soviet state, and previously Tsarist Russia, was never uniform in terms of economic and social development. Traditionally, the most developed region, with the highest quality of life, was the western part: especially Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia; partly the industrial centres in Soviet Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus; and also agricultural Moldova. After 1991, the degree of economic diversification of the newly formed states only grew. Rather than having a common denominator, several models of economy have developed with various levels of development, economic freedom, role of the state and ruling elites, and corruption.

The Baltic states carried out a quick and effective economic transformation, building buoyant capitalist economies integrated (including in the institutional and legal sphere) with the EU market. For the rest of the former Soviet Union, the first decade of independence was a time of profound quality of life collapse, economic crisis and social pauperization, from which these countries began to emerge only in the new century. This was easiest for those countries with raw materials (Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan), which benefitted from the price situation, particularly for oil and gas. This also encouraged a particular economic model which had the characteristics of a market economy but was significantly influenced by the state and oligarchic groups, i.e., informal players privileged by their political influence and major business assets acquired in the period of privatization. Only a few states, however, made genuine efforts to secure economic reform and systemic modernization.

The economic map of the post-Soviet area in 2022 can be divided into several parts. The first, as mentioned, contains the Baltic states, which successfully integrated with the West. The second group comprises Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia, which have made certain – albeit inconsistent and incomplete – efforts to reform but have market economies. Their GDP per capita is similar, which is not to say that there are no differences between them, including the role of oligarchic groups. In the next group are Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, whose economies, which are geared towards the export of raw materials, fulfil certain criteria of a capitalist economy with a simultaneous strong role of state regulations, elements of central planning, and kleptocracy of the ruling elites. It is worth emphasizing that Kazakhstan is perhaps the most successful example of economic transformation in the post-Soviet space, with a GDP per capita twice as high as those in the previous group.

The fourth group contains such states as Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, which – despite highly contrasting economic

systems – are connected by strong state interventionism, central planning and a lack of respect for the right to private property. This is a problem in almost all the states described here, albeit with varying levels and strengths. Russia is alone in the fifth group: it has a raw materials-based economy and developed market features (until a few years ago), and it is characterized by a strong role of the state and – especially since February 2022 – central planning and developed parasitical influences of the kleptocratic elites. The evolution of the Russian economic model is taking place in parallel with Russia's political transformation. The final group consists of Turkmenistan, which has an isolated economy based on raw materials and agriculture, practically dominated by the monopolistic influences of the state, as well as demodernization tendencies.

This brief outline presents a region in which, in economic terms – despite certain common features (such as developed corruption, a lack of strong independent institutions and judiciary system) – there are more divisions than things in common. The tendencies observed suggest that the differences between them will become bigger, also within macroregions, like the five countries of Central Asia, thus forming incompatible economic models. Looking at the UN's Human Development Index from 2020, which measures not only the level of economic development but also the quality of education, life expectancy, access to medical services, etc., the picture of the 15 post-Soviet states becomes even more complicated. Four groups of countries then emerge: 1) Estonia (29th place in the world), Lithuania (34th) and Latvia (37th); 2) Kazakhstan (51st), Russia (52nd), Belarus (53rd) and Georgia (61st); 3) Ukraine (74th), Armenia (81st), Azerbaijan (88th), Moldova (90th); 4) Uzbekistan (106th), Turkmenistan (111th), Kyrgyzstan (120th), and Tajikistan (125th).[4]

ADVANCING DE-RUSSIFICATION

The traditional glue binding the Soviet Union's regions, otherwise disparate in almost every respect, was the Russian language. More than 30 years after the end of the USSR, it remains the lingua franca in the area, although it is becoming less important with each passing year. The reasons for this are the increased significance of national languages, the declining role of Russian in education, and emigration of ethnic Russians. It is worth noting that Russian has received the status of second official language only

4 United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2020. The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene* (New York, 2020) <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2020> [accessed 12 July 2022].

in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, while in Kazakhstan it is permitted for use in state institutions and local authority bodies. The scale of change is demonstrated by data published recently by the Moscow-based Pushkin Institute. Whereas in 1990/1991 some 9.1 million school pupils in Soviet republics (not including the Russian SFSR) were educated in Russian, by 2019/2020 this number had more than halved to 4.1 million.[5]

The de-Russification process has advanced most quickly in the Southern Caucasus, where the number of pupils in schools that teach in Russian has fallen to 2% in Armenia and Georgia and 8.4% in Azerbaijan. The situation in Central Asian countries varies: in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, one third of education still takes place in Russian; in Uzbekistan 10%, in Tajikistan 4.6%, and in Turkmenistan less than 2%. In both regions, the declining importance of Russian has accelerated countries' replacement of Cyrillic with the Latin alphabet, which has already taken place in Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, and is planned for 2025 in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In Moldova, meanwhile, Russian has become slightly less important: in 30 years, the number of Russian-language schools fell from 34.2% to 27.9%.

The only former Soviet country where the importance of Russian has grown, not declined, since 1991, is Belarus. This is the effect of the Lukashenko regime's policy, which has systematically weeded Belarusian out from education and public life. This policy is reflected well by Lukashenko's 2006 statement that "you cannot express anything great in Belarusian. The Belarusian language is poor. There are only two great languages in the world: Russian and English".[6] Although, according to the 2019 census, 61.2% of citizens of Belarus name Belarusian as their native language and 28.5% use it at home, in fact it can barely be heard on the country's streets. A better indicator of the assessment of the linguistic situation is the progressing Russification of schools: in 1994, 40.6% of children were educated in Belarusian, compared to just 10.2% in 2021.[7]

At the other end of the scale is Ukraine, where the declining importance of Russian is particularly significant because of the size of the country's population. In 1994, the proportions of use of Ukrainian and Russian at home were similar: 36.7% of citizens spoke Ukrainian, 32.4% Russian, and 29.4% both languages. By April 2022, the situation

5 Pushkin State Russian Language Institute, *Indeks položenija russkogo jazyka v mire* (Moskwa, 2022) <https://www.pushkin.institute/news/index_2022.pdf> [accessed 10 July 2022].
6 Julija Cjal'puk, 'Aljaksandr Lukašènka zahavaryŭ pa-belarusku', *Belsat.eu*, 1 October 2019 <https://belsat.eu/in-focus/alyaksandr-lukashenka-zagavaryu-pa-belarusku/> [accessed 12 July 2022].
7 Aleksandra Boguslavskaja, 'Kak Lukašenko rešil chajpanut' na belorusskom jazyke', *Deutsche Welle*, 5 February 2022 <https://www.dw.com/ru/kak-lukashenko-reshil-haipanut-na-belorusslom-jazyke/a-60661788> [accessed 10 July 2022].

had changed radically: Ukrainian was used by 51%, Russian 15%, and both languages 33%.[8] In Ukrainian education in 2020, just 6.8% of pupils were taught in Russian.

The process of de-Russification of education, culture, and public life in the post-Soviet states seems irreversible, with Russia's attack on Ukraine only accelerating it. The war will have consequences for the situation of the Russian language not only in this country but in many others too. Only in Belarus has the status of Russian been strengthened, thus threatening the Belarusian language, and a potential reversal of this trend currently appears unlikely.

CONCLUSIONS: FAREWELL TO POST-SOVIETNESS

The above comparative analysis leads to the conclusion that use of the definition 'post-Soviet countries/area' is misleading as it suggests a group of countries that still have much in common. Yet, more than three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 15 countries that have risen from its ashes are marked by considerably more differences than similarities in each of the categories analysed. Returning to the question of the influence of history on the region, since the period of Tsarist Russia no common, consolidated space has emerged, and standardization in the Soviet era ended with partial success at best; it is even harder to speak of any unity of the post-Soviet space at present.

The disintegration of this territory that has been visible since 1991 is therefore no surprise, but it indicates a return to the situation before the Russian Empire's expansion and colonization. Indeed, a process of restoration of great historic macroregions is taking place in Eastern Europe, the Southern Caucasus, and Central Asia, each of which has a different cultural and civilizational identity, thus resulting in profound differences in their political and economic systems and pluralization of the influences of international actors. The most characteristic manifestation of this is Russia's gradual loss of influence in its former provinces, although it still harbours aspirations to become the dominant force there. Nonetheless, not in two centuries has Russian influence in this region been as weak as it is today. For Moscow, this is an unequivocally negative trend. The post-Soviet states are less interested in maintaining – not to mention developing – relations with Russia than in strengthening their own statehood and

8 Sociological Group Rating, *Desjate zahal'nonacional'ne opytuvannja: Ideolohični markery vijny*, 27 April 2022 (Kyiv, 2022) <https://ratinggroup.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg_files/rg_ua_1000_ideological_markers_ua_042022_press.pdf> [accessed 12 July 2022].

national identity, diversifying their foreign partners, and joining non-Russian integration projects. The process of 'regionalization' of the area remains incomplete but is irreversible. The trends described here mean that in the future one can only expect the differences between these countries to deepen, with the Russian attack on Ukraine only hastening them.

While loosening the relations with Moscow imposed on them in recent centuries, the countries of the region are also tightening links with their historic neighbours with whom they were once traditionally connected by plentiful political, economic, cultural, religious and social ties. In Ukraine's case, this process is illustrated well by foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba's programme speech from September 2021. He said: "We need to get back to Central Europe [...] becoming part of a larger united Europe is indivisible from becoming part of a unified Central Europe [...] Ukraine is and has always been a Central European state: historically, politically, and culturally. Most importantly, Central Europe is where our identity belongs".[9]

It is hard to disagree with Kuleba: part of Ukraine was indeed historically closely linked to Central Europe, although this is also a political choice, associated with detaching the country from the imperial Russian legacy and the belief that by referring to this past Ukrainians would not have the chance to develop their own national and cultural identity. Ukraine is not the only one 'escaping' its Russian neighbour, which has little to offer and is trying to pursue a neoimperialist policy of rebuilding its past influences. Similar tendencies can be observed in all of Russia's neighbours, which were once part of the Russian and then the Soviet state (until 2020, this also concerned Belarus) and today wish to reinforce their own statehood, less or more demonstratively, knowing that their independence in fact means independence from Moscow.

So why is the term 'post-Soviet countries' still used? It appears that in the media and among scholars the answer is the lack of an alternative combined with a desire to retain a broad and 'convenient' concept for an extremely diverse territory with few common denominators. Moreover, one of the exponents of the term is Russia, which has an interest in retaining it to preserve the perception of the area as one of supposed continuing unity. The 'post-Soviet region' thereby serves as an effective justification of the special Russian role in the territory as a supposedly privileged state with, for historical reasons, 'special rights'. These Russian designs on domination are still recognized by at least some other international

[9] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 'Dmytro Kuleba: Ukraine is back in Central Europe. Keynote speech by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine at the Ukrainian Central European Forum in Kyiv, 15.09.2021', 20 September 2021 <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/dmytro-kuleba-ukraine-back-central-europe> [accessed 16 July 22].

actors. Yet, the advancing disintegration of the area outlined above – political, economic, cultural, linguistic and value-related – show that it has increasingly little in common with the actual situation. This does not change the fact that use of the term 'post-Soviet area' is an unconscious admission that this is a territory where Russia has particular responsibility and a privileged position.

The presence of the term 'post-Soviet' also seems to be affected by a lack of understanding and broader discussions, including academic ones, on the fact that the Tsarist and Soviet empires were colonial states.[10] However, while the European colonial empires collapsed in the twentieth century and reconciled themselves to the loss of their former lands, Russia is not only trying to restore its former influences but is also willing to start wars to defend its neoimperialist interests. In doing so – unlike the United Kingdom, for example – Moscow has not attempted to create its own 'commonwealth', meaning an organization whose aim is not so much to reintegrate the former Soviet area but to develop neighbourly cooperation. The Commonwealth of Independent States was not such an attempt as Russia designed it to maintain its political and economic influences in the region.

After 1991, the diversification process of an area once dominated by Russia took over, with the states that emerged there returning to their own cultures and traditions, reviving their identity and linguistic distinctness, and diversifying partners and international alliances. Despite the Russian attempts to curb the territory's political, economic, and social disintegration, it not only proved unstoppable but was in fact accelerated by Russian policy. As a result, Moscow's once hegemonic position in the region is becoming a thing of the past. Russia is no longer an attractive partner as it has become not a source of modernization, ideas and technology but of problems and a threat to security and stability. Finally, the Russian aggression in Ukraine has fundamentally changed the relations between the two most important states in the region and has already had a significant visible impact on Moscow's role and influence in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. All signs suggest that the ongoing war is only hastening the final farewell to the post-Soviet space as a category used to describe the region's reality, becoming the proverbial nail in the 'post-Soviet' coffin.

10 Exceptions are works by historians and political scientists from Central Europe or states enslaved by the Soviet Union. Proponents of the argument that the Russian Empire and Soviet Union were colonial states included Józef Mackiewicz and Włodzimierz Bączkowski. See the latter's high-profile article: Włodzimierz Bączkowski, 'Russian Colonialism. The Tsarist and Soviet Empires', in *The Idea of Colonialism*, ed. by Robert Strausz-Hupe, and Harry W. Hazard (New York: University of Pennsylvania, 1958), pp. 70–113.

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