

REFLECTING ON TWENTY YEARS OF POST-SOVIET EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: Two decades of post-Soviet knowledge have produced a host of new realities and a wealth of material for political scientists to study. One major shift is that since 1991, Russian policy has been primarily reactive. But in the last two to three years, homegrown policy initiatives have emerged, both international and regional, leading to new rounds of geopolitical challenges, successes, and failures for the Russian Federation.

Nomenclature

New region, new independent states, new identities and new names—the political lexicon in post-Soviet regional studies has changed since the early 1990s so that it can reflect new realities. In Russian, the names for the sub-regions in Eurasia and for the post-Soviet space itself originally were very Moscow-centered. New identities and foreign policy orientations demanded re-branding. Used in Soviet times and in the early 1990s, the term “Transcaucasia” (Закавказье) means a region behind the Caucasus Mountains, but only if you look from Moscow. So now it is South Caucasus. “Middle Asia,” (Средняя Азия) which in Soviet times did not include Kazakhstan, renamed itself to Central Asia (Центральная Азия) in the early 1990s to include all five states of the region. “The Ukraine” dropped the article in English and changed prepositions in Russian (в

Украине instead of на Украине). The Baltic States are not the “near Baltic” (Прибалтика) anymore.

The main problem is how to name the whole region. Another question is whether a coherent region still exists. “Post-Soviet space” could mean all former republics plus Central and Eastern European countries from the former Soviet bloc. The “Near Abroad” (ближнее зарубежье), a term widely used to describe post-Soviet countries, remains Russo-centric and makes sense only from a Russian perspective. The term “Eurasia” is not very widespread in Russia and other post-Soviet countries because it connotes Eurasianism—a geopolitical intellectual school drawing from 19th century (and 1920s) Slavophiles. The “CIS region,” especially after Georgia’s withdrawal, also does not cover the entire region. “Newly independent states” are not so new by now. So the question about a politically neutral name for the region still stands.

Schools of Thought

One of the ideas of this collection of articles was to look at the main trends in theoretical and empirical analysis seeking to explain the processes in Eurasia during the last 20 years.

Among the Russian community of international relations scholars, it is widely believed that Western political science is too attached to methodology while the same rather trivial conclusions can be made by armchair theorists without tiring and expensive field research. Another claim is that Western theories do not explain the post-Soviet realities. But, in fact, such reasoning may be just an excuse not to develop our own theories.

In Russia, in international relations and security studies, all original research is made at the empirical level. Ideas, such as the concept of an energy superpower or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS as anti-hegemonic balancing coalitions, usually are not backed up by theoretical explanations. Most Russian international relations (IR) theoretical works are secondary and draw from the already existing Western grand and middle-range theories, mainly realism. The only theoretical school that organically grew from Russia’s empirical soil is geopolitics, which dates back to the 19th century. It is the only IR theory that views Russia as a great power because of its unique and favorable geographic position. In realist and liberal theories, other types of resources are considered crucial. From these theoretical perspectives, it turns out that Russia, even with its nuclear arms and UN Security Council veto, is still relatively weaker than other great powers because it has fewer resources to project its power in any form, whether by military might or the strength of its ideas.

In the same fashion, other states privilege theories that allow them to be placed higher in the global hierarchy. The United States is mainly

the land of realism, with its focus on power. Militarily and economically weaker Europe develops integration theories and ideational approaches with a strong attachment to constructivism, because Europe views itself as a historic cradle of all great ideas from democracy to sovereignty. Russian scholars remain attached to outdated theoretical schemes, which lead to the almost total exclusion of Russian IR scholars from theoretical debates, unless Russian scholars adopt the approaches of Western theoretical schools.

Theory, Reality, and Perception

There are three Western works that greatly influenced the Russian and post-Soviet scientific and political discourse: *The Clash of Civilizations* (1992-1993) by Samuel Huntington, *The End of History* (1992) by Francis Fukuyama and the geopolitical approach of Zbigniew Brzezinski expressed in *The Grand Chessboard* (1998). Until now, Russian and post-Soviet politicians and experts argue against these theories because they invoke our major fears and weaknesses. The first idea they oppose is partition of Russia, a fear inflated by two Chechen wars, independence movements in the 1990s in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Sakha, and Chinese demographic expansion in Siberia and the Far East in the 2000s. The second fear is the loss of national identity, or lack of an identity at all. The Russian pro-Western foreign policy of Andrey Kozyrev (Yeltsin's first foreign minister known as "Mr. Yes") in the early 1990s is associated not with an improvement in the relations with the West, but with extreme weakness and the inability to defend Russia's own national interests. This interpretation can be read in all university textbooks, while Yevgeny Primakov's idea of a Russia-China-India strategic triangle is considered to mark a gradual return to strength.

Power and Strength

Until recently, the key term of many conferences on the post-Soviet region was the "vacuum of power" in Eurasia that will inevitably be filled by external actors—the United States, NATO, EU, and China. Russia was afraid of losing its influence in Eurasia, but, according to some analysts, did not make much of an effort to regain it. Conventional realist analysis suggests otherwise, pointing to Russia's involvement in the various wars of Soviet succession (Transdniester, Abkhazia, Tajikistan,); pipeline politics and gas disputes with Ukraine and Belarus in the mid-2000s; opposition to NATO expansion to former Soviet states; and involvement in a variety of multinational institutions (CIS, CSO, CSTO, etc.). However, these facts show that Russian policies were reactive, rather than proactive. In regional processes, including peacekeeping operations and regional integration,

Moscow felt like Moliere's "doctor in spite of himself," just responding to the demands of other actors. Only in the past two or three years has Russia started trying to become a real regional power that initiates new processes, such as the Eurasian Union.

Generalizations and Lessons

Anniversaries invite scholars to draw conclusions and make generalizations. But maybe we are trying to find answers to the wrong questions. The main question presumed in most discussions celebrating the 20th anniversary of post-Soviet independence is usually not directly articulated: What lessons has the West taught the post-Soviet states? And how much have the post-Soviet states learned? It is true not only for the Western conferences, but the ones in Eurasian countries as well. My question would be: What lessons can the post-Soviet states teach the West?

The first lesson relates to conflicts and peacekeeping. To observe neutrality and objectivity, the UN peacekeeping practice was originally based on the principle that the peacekeepers should not have an interest in the dispute. In the conflicts throughout the CIS, the most interested state—Russia—not only conducted peacekeeping operations, but also involved contingents of the parties to the conflict. Moreover, the Russian peacekeepers were usually the Russian military units based in the region of conflict as holdovers from the Soviet period. From the point of view of world practice, such peacekeeping operations are an anomaly (given the participation of the parties to the conflict). But the fact that peacekeepers had a vested interest in the conflict led to an outcome that defied expectations: the conflicts were frozen quickly and in a relatively bloodless way.

Non-recognized states, of course, are a problem. But maybe it is better to freeze a conflict than to resolve it. The Tajik civil war is the only conflict in Eurasia that was solved and not frozen. The result cost more than 60,000 human lives and countless refugees—is it the right price for a definitive peace settlement? In other conflicts, the Russian military stepped aside at the moment when a military balance between the conflict parties was established, and gave way to politicians so that they could find the right political solution. Decades of political negotiations are better than decades of military action. If outside actors take sides during the military stage of settlement, it leads to greater losses for all parties involved than if outsiders take sides during the subsequent political stage. That is the first lesson.

The second lesson is about best practices. Analysts usually compare efforts to promote regional integration in the post-Soviet space with Western experience. The CIS, Eurasian Economic Community, and Customs Union are usually compared to the EU, while the CSTO and

SCO are examined in light of NATO. The inevitable conclusion is that the post-Soviet projects are relatively ineffective. The CSTO and SCO are moreover dubbed anti-NATO blocs. Overlapping and duplicative formats of regional cooperation are usually considered a failure of integration efforts. However, NATO and the EU also have overlapping membership which led to the idea of the Berlin Plus agreement. As for the multiple formats of economic cooperation, after the financial crisis we see the idea of a two-speed Europe becoming more and more popular. But let me remind you that already back in 1993 the Russian Foreign Policy Concept developed the idea of “multispeed and multi-format integration” in the CIS. Coalitions of the willing and flexible institutional structures are a trend in international relations lately.

Multiple formats meant more flexibility and were necessary for the transition period as the newly independent states searched for their national identities and foreign policy orientations. The political priorities of the post-Soviet states have more or less consolidated, so the time is ripe for projects such as Putin’s Eurasian Union, which is supposed to unite the existing economic formats. The CIS as an overarching regional project aiming at a unified level of cooperation among all members failed. In order for such projects to work, you must start from the framework of the EU predecessors, such as the European Coal and Steel Community and European Economic Community, not the contemporary EU. To arrive at the same result, you have to make the same mistakes. The same is true about democratic institutions. Borrowing the already “tested” practices will not lead to quick results, so blaming the regimes and regional organizations for ineffectiveness is meaningless. It is important to underline that there were excessive expectations from both sides—the West and the post-Soviet states. Both awaited miraculous transformations. Both were disappointed. The West was disappointed by disobedient and lazy apprentices. The newly independent states were disappointed by democratic practices and the capitalist economy. This led to mutual accusations. But the point is that the destination is right, but the path is wrong. That is the second lesson.

The third lesson follows from the question about the winners and losers in the Cold War and it is the most controversial point in this article. It reflects how world affairs are seen from Moscow and it is more about mutual perceptions than official political discourses.

Why are some former communist countries excluded from the circle of the democratic community? Despite the facts that Russia was brought into the G-8 and declared a “strategic partner” of the United States in the 1990s, Moscow is still excluded from the democratic community. Putin’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 was exactly about a feeling of exclusion from the global decision-making processes. For

Western analysts a simple explanation is that Russia is not a democracy and, moreover, it is simply too big to be easily brought into the EU and NATO, even if it met membership criteria, which it does not. But what was the real difference between Russia and the former Socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s? Maybe the only difference is that the West from the very beginning was ready to incorporate some of the post-Soviet states into Euro-Atlantic structures and not others?

In response to the multiple complaints of the Russian president about U.S. behavior, Robert Gates invoked in Munich “nostalgia for a less complex time” during the Cold War.¹ It was a less complex time, indeed, in the way that interests and motives behind two competing ideologies were mutually transparent. We were playing one game. But suddenly one of the players destroyed itself. What did the other player have to do? If you withdraw from the game and start a new one, you are not a winner any more. That is why, to remain a winner, the West reproduces the familiar Cold War environment. This self-sustaining mechanism works through the enrollment of some countries and exclusion of others. If Russia enters NATO, all other members will withdraw.

From the Kremlin’s point of view, now we see the same old game where the underlying motive of the West is to stay the winner. However, there is a nuance: if the West really defeated the Soviet Union, it just shows who had more power but not who was right and had the ultimate moral authority. It is actually the self-destruction of the Soviet regime that gave real global legitimacy to the democratic capitalist ideology.

International relations are intuitively considered somehow defective in comparison to the structure of relations within national borders because the international environment has an anarchic structure with no supranational authority at the global level. Nevertheless, maybe it is better when no one can pretend to possess the ultimate truth—as global democracy without opposition is communism.

¹ Robert Gates. 2007. Speech at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy. At http://www.securityconference.de/archive/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_2007=&menu_konferenze_n=&sprache=en&id=192&. Accessed January 29, 2012.