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# Thirty Years On: Is There Still a Post-Soviet Space?

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## Context

The dissolution of the Soviet Union thirty years ago was celebrated by some as victory of democracy and the West in the Cold War. Inside the former USSR, it produced mixed feelings. Some met it with euphoria and anticipation that the decades-long isolation from the rest of the world and limits on personal freedoms had come to an end and that democracy and civil liberties would be installed in the former republics. Others celebrated the (re-)establishment of independence of nation states. For yet some other citizens, the Soviet collapse came unexpectedly and left them apprehensive, fearful of an uncertain future. Subsequent 3000% inflation and political turmoil of the 1990s left many nostalgic about the seemingly stable and secure Soviet times.

The *International Institute for Peace*, jointly with the *Konrad Adenauer Foundation for Multilateral Dialogue*, the *Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies*, and the *Institute for Danube Region and Central Europe* organized this conference to look at the former Soviet states, how they have transformed in the last three decades, and whether one can still put the countries in this increasingly diverse region under the same umbrella of a ‘post-Soviet space’. The questions guiding our inquiry could be split in three levels: political, societal and economical. Through panel discussions and workshops, we aimed to understand what trajectories the former Soviet republics have taken. *What guides their political and economic development? What regional and global actors do they incline to? What other regional identities and narratives prevail in public discourses today?*

Finally, the European Community (and later the European Union) was immediately affected by the Soviet breakup. Today the EU includes some of the former Soviet republics, while some other countries have close cooperation with it and even aspire to full membership. The conference explored EU relations with the Eastern Neighbors and Russia, discussing the current challenges and suggesting potential paths for their further development.

*The conference brought together researchers, academics, diplomats and practitioners from post-Soviet countries, Vienna, and the EU. Discussions took place in the format of closed workshops for invited participants. The keynote speech by a prominent guest and a panel discussion in the evening of the first conference day was open to the public.*

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## GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

- The term ‘post-Soviet space’ can be problematic and it is difficult to identify a coherent region that can definitively be called the post-Soviet space. On the one hand, there clearly is a post-Soviet space in geographical and historical terms. At the same time, today one can discern many various clusters in this area based on different levels of industrialization, predominance of the oil industry or agriculture in the economy, different levels of democracy/authoritarianism, corruption and oligarchism. There are some common trends too, such as common security challenges and the uniquely dominant role of Russia for these countries. Also, the great internal debate (or conflict) about geopolitical orientation and models of internal development plays a huge role in many of these countries.
  - The term Homo-Sovieticus is a vague archetype that cannot really be applied to the countries of the former Soviet Union coherently. However, again there are some common trends, such as the role of networks in these countries and hybrid illiberal democratic systems. Nevertheless, in many countries a lot of citizens still share a sense of nostalgia about the Soviet Union.
  - The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains there despite the Azerbaijani takeover of a significant part of the disputed territory. The humanitarian situation is dire. Russia’s peacekeeping mission has been essential for stopping the violence. However, questions are raised whether Moscow will try to prolong its military presence in the region after the current mandate of the mission expires in 2025.
  - Azerbaijan is returning IDPs to the territories under its control. The result might be that Nagorno Karabakh as a separate entity/de-facto state will cease to exist. Despite the military defeat, Armenians went on to re-elect the pro-democracy party of Nikol Pashinyan, as opposed to Karabakh hardliners. The concept of transitional sovereignty has become relevant for Nagorno Karabakh in this new situation because of the problems associated with transitional justice after the war.
  - While Russia sees social movements in Belarus and Ukraine through a similar geopolitical lens, regarding the countries as its legitimate sphere of influence, the movements’ nature and root causes are fundamentally different. Ukraine’s foreign policy has set EU and NATO integration as the country’s strategic goal, with the conflict in the east perceived as Russian attempts to prevent Kyiv from achieving it. Belarus has not faced a geopolitical divide in the society. The political crisis after the 2020 presidential elections did not initially have a geopolitical dimension but concerned domestic questions of governance and institutions. Even today Belarusian society would most likely prefer to avoid choosing sides (West or Russia). The Lukashenka regime has however clearly opted for Russian support, whatever the cost.
  - Ukraine is the main area of contest between Russia and the West. Russia is a neo-imperialist power with grand designs on Eastern Europe, but the West must seek a dialogue with Russia and try to foster deeper integration without antagonising Russia’s sense of security. Both Russia and the West need to engage in a more understanding dialogue. Right now, both sides are talking past each other and dialogue platforms like the OSCE fail to facilitate solutions.
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- Unlike with other former Soviet republics that Russia considers its sphere of influence and opposes their aspirations for EU and NATO membership, the Baltic states are now part of the EU and NATO and this fact is also accepted by Russia.
  - In Central Asia, the War in Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover presents a significant security threat to the region. The Central Asian states are debating over who can provide them security, and if they should create their own integration project or join Russia in the EAEU and CSTO.
  - Central Asia is often thought of as a coherent post-Soviet region with many commonalities. But the countries are going in different directions, in part dependent on the resource wealth of the countries. Ecological threats, including water security, are particularly relevant in Central Asia.
  - There is a significant divide between post-Soviet states with regard to demographics. Islamic countries are growing while non-Islamic countries are shrinking in size of population. Migration plays a very large role in post-Soviet economies; many lower-skilled workers go to Russia for work and send back remittances. Despite having relatively well-educated populations, former Soviet states (apart from the Baltic States) suffer from weak public institutions, which holds back economic development and life satisfaction of citizens.
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## INTRODUCTION

When asked about the consequences of the French Revolution, a Chinese diplomat once famously said that it was too early to tell. 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and communism in Eastern Europe, in many ways it is also too early to tell exactly what the consequences of this dramatic event are. One can nevertheless ask a number of questions: is there still a post-Soviet space? How can one compare post-Soviet countries? And how will the post-Soviet space, if it even exists, look in the future? By exploring many different areas of the so-called post-Soviet space, including the politics, societies, identities, economies and cultures in the countries of the former Soviet Union, perhaps some of these questions may be answered.

## POLITICAL SYSTEMS: FROM AUTOCRACY TO DIFFERENT STATE SYSTEMS?

In some ways, there is what can be called a ‘post-Soviet space’, as there are some common trends in these countries that can be seen as a legacy of the Soviet Union. The continued disintegration throughout the 1990s, not only political but also economic and social, resulted in market failures and thus widespread poverty and discontent. These factors have led to a renewed importance of history for some of the peoples of these countries; memories of happier days under Soviet rule, leading to the increase in popularity of traditionalist and nationalist ideas.

The term ‘post-Soviet’ can be problematic for some in these countries, who believe it is a cursed term implying that these so-named countries are not ready for democracy and European values, and that it excuses their failures in this regard. The term increases the gap between the West and these countries, and waning European enthusiasm for their deeper integration does not inspire trust. In the Baltic States, which have experienced a vastly different and more positive course of development since 1991, many feel the term post-Soviet to be an inappropriate appellation, especially for their countries.

*The lack of support from the democratic world for anti-corruption systems in former Soviet republics allows antagonists to succeed.*

In order to define a post-Soviet space, one can identify trends that are common to these countries and make it difficult for them to distance themselves from the oligarchic and kleptocratic system of Russia. Some such trends include the sending of remittances (a political advantage for Russia) and corruption (some leaders are politically linked to, and have property in, Russia). The lack of support from the democratic world for anti-corruption systems in former Soviet republics allows antagonists to succeed and makes autocratic states appear to be more successful models of development and governance. Moreover, it is difficult for these countries to integrate into the global economy due to the high standards. Russia can exploit this by having lower standards than its competitors, maintaining these countries’ trade dependency on the Russian market.

The post-Soviet space is marked by security issues and Russian power projection and involvement, trying to keep these countries as close to Russia and as far from Europe as possible. Politically some of these countries are similar in their lack of democracy and higher levels of poverty, and economic underperformance is a key issue. This, combined with weak institutions and state inefficiency, leaves them more open to security problems. Membership of

the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is also an important contributor to the post-Soviet geopolitical reality. Additionally, there are great variations between countries caused by numerous factors, including size of population, language and religion. Identity, too, is open to manipulation, with common history being promoted through identity projects.

Russia since 1991 has been trying to adapt to the rules of the game in terms of democratisation and economic transformation. Under Vladimir Putin, Russia has gradually changed its institutional framework from democratic to authoritarian, suiting the centralised oligarchical system under the President. In the 1990s Russian society wanted democracy, but as the years went by and failure after failure occurred, the people more and more sought a return to the Soviet system. By 1999 49% of Russians wanted a return to the Soviet system, while at that point barely 16% were in favour of a western system for Russia. Nowadays the Russian people are not looking to return to the Soviet era, but they are looking for some kind of utopia, neither western nor Soviet. Stable regimes do not change and escape from the current system is not possible. As such, people feel it is better for them to be quiet.

In Ukraine the oligarchic model of politics had been sustainable until 2014. Russian aggression and the annexation of Crimea and separatism in eastern parts of Ukraine has dramatically changed views on Russia, so that now most Ukrainians are either pro-EU or nationalists. The country is also in the grips of a so-called ‘Crimea Syndrome’, whereby the question of Crimea and Ukraine’s eastern separatist regions are at the centre of the country’s political agenda. Many also do not think NATO and EU membership is a realistic prospect for Ukraine.

Azerbaijan has also gone through an identity crisis since it gained independence. Azerbaijanis recall positively the two brief years of democracy between the Russian Revolution and the establishment of the USSR. Since 1991, nostalgia for the USSR has been driven by frustration with western oil companies. The revival of Islamic identity in Azerbaijan contrasts against the

***Today Moldova is a bright spot of democracy and there are high hopes that things will improve and the rule of law will be strengthened.***

legacy of Soviet atheism so that one can see Islamic shops and wine shops on opposite sides of the street. Iranian religious propaganda is also a problem in terms of radicalisation.

Moldova has experienced recent success for pro-EU political forces after a long period of oligarchic control and deep public mistrust in governance. Today Moldova is a bright spot of democracy and there are

high hopes that things will improve and the rule of law will be strengthened. Domestic issues are now the priority over geopolitical orientation. However, although the kleptocrats have left the country, their benign influence remains and they still have links to the judiciary and government, and this remains Moldova’s biggest challenge.

The biggest external drivers in the Moldovan economy have been the Association Agreement with the EU and the large diaspora, which plays a crucial role in remittances, as well as its participation in elections. Internally, civil society and media shape public opinion and bring to light non-democratic practices, which has led to political aggression against civil society. Kleptocrats still control the media, while the large (~30%) Russian-speaking population and the Russian Orthodox Church (~80%) are also powerful actors in the country. Politics are more internally driven than externally, with a focus on reforms. The governing party has been inclusive, being neither pro-EU nor pro-Russian, which has led to deeper trust in society.

## ‘HOMO SOVIETICUS’ – DOES THIS ARCHETYPE STILL EXIST?

Russian identity since the fall of the Soviet Union has been insecure. Soviet identity was based not only on communism but on many factors, such as Soviet exceptionalism due to the USSR’s rise as a global superpower, as well as the Cold War and the sense of the capitalist enemy. The 1990s was a traumatic time for many Russians; the total economic collapse that affected the majority of the population, and the failure to bring about some kind of western democratic political system, left a power gap in Russian politics, which would be filled by Vladimir Putin. Putin played on the sense of Russian exceptionalism after the trauma of the 1990s.

Critics of the term Homo-Sovieticus point to the fact that it is a very broad term – a vague archetype that cannot cover the broad development trajectories of all the post-Soviet states and hinders a normal democratic transition from taking place. Nevertheless, there are certain patterns of behaviour that can be observed in the people of these states, such as cynicism, doublethink, and an individual disbelief in political participation.

*Lukashenka has proven to be a vaccination for other countries in the region against the Belarusian development model.*

When Aliaksandar Lukashenka came to power in Belarus in 1994, he played on a return to the Soviet Union to win support, using the narrative of Soviet industrialisation. The mass protests in 2020 were a critical juncture for Belarus – Lukashenka has proven to be a vaccination for other countries in the region against the Belarusian development model.

In Georgia the Soviet legacy is rather different, being based primarily on Georgia’s different development path and its conflicts with Russia. In security terms one can identify a post-Soviet space due to Putin’s specific foreign policy in these countries. They belong to a common security zone in which Russia is dominant, and Russia is especially active in influencing these countries’ societies. Although there is a sizable amount of Soviet nostalgia in Georgia, it is less than in other countries due to the narrative of the Russian and Soviet occupation of Georgia. This narrative has been successful in turning Georgia towards a pro-European path of development and distancing the country from Russia. Indeed, Soviet nostalgia is no longer a topic of polite conversation in Georgia. The Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 replaced the Soviet-era Georgian elite with a younger and westernised elite, who radically changed Georgia’s geopolitical orientation and embarked on highly ambitious domestic reforms. There were clear winners and losers during this process, a split which still exists today. There are considerable people to people links between Georgia and Russia. Poor relations are at the state-to-state level, and Georgia relies on the Russian economy for exports and on Russian tourists.

One aspect of a post-Soviet identity is the importance of networks. In the USSR there were three kinds of network through which people operated: the nomenklatura, the intelligentsia, and the criminal underworld. The Baltic States have overcome these networks to a greater degree than other post-Soviet countries, but it should be noted that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were parts of the USSR for 20 years less than other constituent nations, and perhaps this fact means these networks had less time to entrench themselves into the Baltic States’ societies, thus allowing them to escape their Soviet legacy more quickly.

In Latvia people strongly avoid the term post-Soviet in relation to Latvia. The rapid development and westernisation of the Baltic States after 1991, and the fact that they were never



legally recognised as parts of the USSR by western countries, distinguish them from other post-Soviet states. After 1991 Latvia was largely a mix of three broad groups of people. The first group are Latvians who have lived their whole lives in Latvia (including during the Soviet period). The second group consists of returnees – some of the ~100,000 people who emigrated from Latvia before or during the Soviet period and their descendants who have returned to Latvia. This group can hardly be called post-Soviet. The third group is those immigrants who came to Latvia during the Soviet period from other parts of the USSR. The Soviet mentality persisted among this group and they have had to integrate into Latvia (or Estonia or Lithuania), and they primarily speak Russian as their main language. Things have largely changed since 2004, when Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined the EU, and integration means these categories are no longer relevant. Today only 15% of people in Latvia identify as non-Latvian, and for them it is merely a personal choice to remain separate from the rest of society.

In Uzbekistan there is a generational divide in post-Soviet identity. With already two generations separating those who grew up in the USSR to young people today, the youth (and often even their parents) know little about how life was during the USSR. Therefore, to speak of a coherent Homo-Sovieticus is irrelevant.

When speaking of a post-Soviet space, although primarily describing a common geographic area, another common element to be found within many former Soviet states is the socio-economic system. Elements of the kind of hybrid illiberal democratic system that can be found in many post-Soviet states can also be found in other post-communist countries, like Hungary.

## **OLD CONFLICTS – NEW REALITIES: THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AND TRANSNISTRIA**

The international dimension to post-Soviet conflicts has made them notoriously difficult to solve over the years. Traditional approaches to conflict resolution have not led to any success. International recognition is off the table. The breakaway territories cannot return to their parent state. And the de facto states cannot be entirely ignored. Instead, an international policy to normalise relations with de facto states in the post-Soviet space is the best approach, an example of which can be seen with the EU's relations with Transnistria. For the past 10 years the EU has been trying to support Transnistria's inclusion into the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) programme, as a way to improve the territory's social, economic and infrastructure normalisation with the EU.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the international isolation of de facto states has been something of a blessing, given the closed and heavily guarded borders. However, they have been more dependent on their patron state – Russia – for vaccines and medical supplies.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was more of a simmering than a frozen conflict. Although the territory is provisionally back under Azerbaijani control, it faces a dramatic humanitarian situation; many areas are covered in landmines, which take a very long time to clear. Azerbaijan has great plans for Nagorno-Karabakh – it intends to make the region suitable for tourism, and not just for returning internally displaced persons (IDPs), most of whom want to return to Karabakh. Yet

*Traditional approaches to conflict resolution have not led to any success in post-Soviet conflicts.*

the situation today is unstable, as there are shootings every day and constant border disputes. The area is controlled by Russian peacekeepers. The future of Nagorno-Karabakh is bleak, as it may end up becoming like Abkhazia – another Russian garrison. One can also expect Russia to justify an extension to having its troops in Karabakh when the ceasefire agreement ends in 2025.

Armenia has been coming to terms with the new reality that it no longer controls the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and the de facto Republic of Artsakh has ceased to exist. However, Armenia has passed the test of resilience – after the popular uproar after their military defeat in 2020, Armenians went on to re-elect the pro-democracy party of Nikol Pashinyan, as opposed to Karabakh hardliners. There are some promising international trends: we have seen a resurrection of the utility of the OSCE Minsk Group for international dialogue, and an agreement is coming regarding border demarcation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as railway access. The concept of transitional sovereignty has become relevant in this regard because of the problems associated with transitional justice after the war. Going forward, Armenia's relations with its neighbours will depend on its acceptance of the new reality. A realistic assessment of its capabilities vis-à-vis Azerbaijan and Turkey, and its dependence on a Russia that will not actively engage militarily on its side, puts Armenia in a vulnerable position geopolitically. Normalising relations is now the priority.

For Russia it is important to be seen as a neutral actor in the region, while it engages in a build-up of power in the South Caucasus, asserting itself as the guarantor of peace and having complete control over Armenia's borders. Pashinyan appears to be the opposite of Lukashenka and can be seen as a trophy on Putin's shelf. The Karabakh question is not entirely solved yet. Stepanakert is not under Azerbaijani control and Azerbaijan is unlikely to invest in those areas of Karabakh it does not control. The EU does not have a coherent policy on the Karabakh issue and there are differences between the different EU institutions. Moreover, the OSCE cannot be an effective actor on the Karabakh issue because Russia has a veto in that organisation. The 3+3 (Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan + Russia, Iran, Turkey) format for dialogue is a non-starter for Armenia due to the role of Turkey. The role of Georgia as a broker would be welcome by Armenia, although some in Armenia see Georgia as a rival.

So, what is the outlook for 2050? In an ideal world the South Caucasus would be an interconnected region, but it is likely the frozen conflicts will not be resolved. In the worst case there will be no region at all. Georgia will still be applying for NATO membership, and the Armenia will still be obsessed with its lost territories.

## **BELARUS AND UKRAINE: GEOPOLITICAL ANSWERS TO CIVIL SOCIETY MOVEMENTS**

There are different ways in which Ukraine experiences post-Soviet influence. Externally, Russia rebuilding its sphere of influence is having a major impact on Ukraine, perhaps its primary target. Within Ukraine the post-Soviet legacy can be seen differently, such as through

***The territorial conflicts in Ukraine and other EaP members [...] are one of the primary hindrances for their [EU & NATO] accession.***

societal values. Although Ukraine has gained political independence from Russia, the same cannot be said about cultural independence.

There was a lot of nostalgia for the Soviet Union in Ukraine (~48%) before the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich came to power. After the Euromaidan there was a surge in populism with leader Petro Poroshenko, who promised to solve many of Ukraine's problems, but who also has kept the conflicts in eastern Ukraine alive. Although the conflicts have frozen again, people in eastern Ukraine are being offered Russian

passports, thus leading to the 'passportization' of the regions whereby, as in Abkhazia, Russia cements its claims over certain territories due to the presence of Russian citizens.

The question of NATO and EU accession are highly relevant in the case of Ukraine. Although NATO had promised membership for Ukraine, the organisation has not elaborated a way for the country to join, and both NATO and the EU talk the talk when it comes to potential membership for Ukraine, but neither walks the walk. The territorial conflicts in Ukraine and other EaP members with an Association Agreement with the EU (Moldova & Georgia) are one of the primary hindrances for their accession.

To an extent there has been a politicisation of social movements in Belarus, which is based on values. 2020 heralded a never-before-seen level of aggravation among society. Although it is difficult to know the exact figures, one could estimate that around one third of Belarusian society support the current regime. It is hard to see a solution for Belarus. Internal compromise between the Lukashenka regime and the population is impossible and the situation could easily get worse. Overall, given the geopolitics of Eastern Europe, it is impossible for society not to be divided.

When examining civil society in Belarus, no one knows where Russian influence ends. From the Russian point of view, the crisis in Belarus holds little importance, but Lukashenka could become a risk factor for Moscow due to his emotional missteps. The ongoing migrant problem on the Polish-Belarusian border is indicative of the headaches he can cause for Moscow.

Russia sees Belarus and Ukraine through the same geopolitical lens. In Ukraine the east/west divide is acute and the country's geopolitical orientation is the most important political issue. In Belarus, on the other hand, domestic governance is the primary issue for society and the east/west divide is less clear. Unfortunately, public opinion in Belarus cannot be polled, though there does seem to be a societal consensus of not wanting to belong to any bloc, in spite of the fact that Lukashenka has clearly chosen the Russian side for Belarus, and that the opposition is clearly supported by the West.

***In Belarus domestic governance is the primary issue for society and the east/west divide is less clear.***

On the question of whether economic interconnection could improve relations between Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and the EU, it is important to note that Russia is these countries' largest trade partner, and trade often bypasses political issues. For example, the territorial dispute between Russia and Japan over the Kuril Islands has little impact on Russian-Japanese trading relations.

Trade can also be used as leverage by both sides, but one can also look at the example of economic interdependence between France and Germany as a means of avoiding conflict.

After the collapse of the USSR, all of the problems of state-building had to be solved as quickly as possible. Thus, questions of national identity, democracy, and minority rights became immediately necessary to answer as the previous status quo crumbled away. Russia became a nation-state with an ethnic identity, which sought to protect the many other Russians living outside its borders. It was (and is) not easy to define exactly what a Russian is. Is it an ethnic eastern Slav, or is it a citizen of the diverse Russian Federation? In Ukraine and Belarus, the situation is also complex due to the presence of two languages. In the Baltic States the Russian language became the main marker of a Russian-speaking identity, in contrast to the titular ethnicity. Russia's involvement in its neighbours' internal affairs due to ethnic concerns varies. For instance, Russia involves itself to a much greater degree in Ukrainian internal affairs than in Latvian affairs, despite the presence of large Russian-speaking populations in both countries, thus masking its own ambitions through ethnic concerns.

## **Public panel: THE EU AND ITS NEIGHBOURS TO THE EAST: PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE RELATIONS**

### **Part I (Speaker: Philip Ther)**

When discussing whether or not there is truly a post-Soviet space, there are three key areas that should be discussed: the concept of space itself; the history of the post-Soviet space; and the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

In debates on European geopolitics, do we discuss a post-Habsburg space or a post-Ottoman space? We do not, so why do we discuss a post-Soviet space? The term post-Soviet space is geopolitical, referring to the space of neo-imperial Russian interests. The Russian Empire was the only continental European empire to survive territorially after the First World War, yet in 1991 it disintegrated without any major war. This is because 1991 signifies a Russian retreat – after the collapse Russia lost all of the territory it had conquered over the previous 300 years. Even after the Brest-Litovsk Treaty in WWI Russia managed to hold on to many of its colonial territories. This raises the question of why Russia in 1991 accepted these territorial losses peacefully.

*The Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 saw Russia's first foreign intervention since the Soviet collapse.*

With the process of Glasnost during the 1980s, the Soviet leadership began to accept the Soviet past. Events like the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact were officially admitted, and the Soviet territorial claim over the Baltic States became weaker and weaker. Imperial overstretch characterised the final years of the Soviet Union, while internal crises in Russia, including economic breakdown and bankruptcy, and ethnic separatism both inside Russia and in neighbouring republics, was too much for the Soviet regime. Boris Yeltsin became the leader of the newly independent Russian Federation, and the population in 1991 wanted democracy and peace with Russia's neighbours.

But as the 1990s progressed, nostalgia for the USSR grew. The economic catastrophe of those years in Russia was traumatic for the population, and the new Russia experienced violent

internal conflicts and Islamist separatism. Russians were the losers of the collapse of the USSR. For other republics, becoming independent states was at least some kind of victory.

Russia received little support from the West. It became clear that Russia would not integrate into the EU or NATO, although this is what some Russians wanted. By 1993 the country had descended into an oligarchy, with wealth concentrated among a few people at the very top. Geopolitically, Russia was restrained during this period – it did not intervene in Crimea, in spite of a majority pro-Russian population, and Russia did not seek any border changes. However, the drifting of Russia's western neighbours, especially Ukraine, towards NATO was a significant concern for Moscow.

1999 saw NATO forces intervene in Kosovo and the first round of NATO expansion into formerly communist countries (Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary), in spite of strong Russian opposition. In 2004 NATO expanded again further into Eastern Europe. The Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 saw Russia's first foreign intervention since the Soviet collapse. At the time the EU was paralysed by internal debates between Member States on the adoption of an EU Constitution. Similarly, NATO had been significantly weakened by the War in Iraq and shelved plans for Ukrainian accession. At this point Russia's neo-imperialist plans become more evident.

Ukraine is the second biggest country in Europe. Yet in Ukraine, the term 'Europe' is often used in a way that suggests Ukraine is not already in Europe, similar to the way 'Europe' was used in pre-Brexit Britain to refer to the EU. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova represent a split in the post-Soviet space, such that it could be said the post-Soviet space no longer exists. The region is now marked by a fight for geopolitical hegemony between the West and Russia. The conflict in Ukraine should not be seen as a domestic Ukrainian conflict, but as a Ukraine-Russia conflict. Ukraine is a democracy in the making, with clear western ambitions, while Russia is trying to rebuild an empire on ethnic nationalism.

## Part II

**(Moderation: Hannes Swoboda; Panellists: Vasily Astrov; Tinatin Khidasheli; Kristi Raik; Tatiana Romanova; Sebastian Schäffer)**

Estonia was lucky after it regained independence. It went through a process of very rapid development and by 2004 it had joined the EU and NATO. It lies in a favourable international environment, with no conflicts. In short, after 50 years of occupation, Estonia's dreams had come true, and between 2003 and 2013 Estonia had never been so secure. Since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, there has been a growing great power politics in Europe. Ukraine becoming pro-western after the Euromaidan in 2014 has been the biggest shift in European geopolitics. Russia has been becoming increasingly authoritarian, raising the prospect of an unstable transfer of power in Russia. Moreover, Russia is becoming increasingly defensive and has been undermining European security by using economic relations as a threat. It is impossible to predict what could happen.

From the Georgian perspective, it is important to distinguish between *political* Europe and *geographic* Europe. Georgia very much sees itself as belonging to the former, though it is geographically in the Caucasus. Georgia has felt invisible to the West since the 2008 War with Russia, wherein Georgia received little

*Georgia has felt invisible to the West since the 2008 War with Russia.*

support from NATO or the EU. Georgia is a place where Russia is contesting the West for influence, and Russia is trying to show that Georgia belongs to its neighbourhood. For Georgians, it appears that the EU and NATO have constructed a new Iron Curtain, the countries beyond which they do not see as their concern. Furthermore, Russian sanctions were a blessing in disguise for Georgia, as the country was able to strongly diversify its economy and exports when Russia closed its market to Georgia.

Since 1991 Russia has gradually become more assertive and revisionist, seeking to redefine its place in the world and its relations with neighbouring countries. It does not seek to be a part of Europe in the sense that Georgia and Ukraine do, but it seeks to reassert its influence over what it sees as its own neighbourhood, wherever it lost control in 1991, as well as challenge the existing rules-based international order. Eastern Europe is the main area of competition in this regard. In order to find solutions to the current relations, mutual trust must be restored. The West should not expect to find a partner in a Russia that feels its security is threatened. International sanctions also do not help. Instead, we should challenge the EU's monopolisation of the word 'Europe' to make it more inclusive for countries like Russia. Currently, however, there is no long-term vision for better relations with Russia, and there is no incentive for Russia to change.

*In terms of cooperation on shared challenges, it appears that even the Covid-19 pandemic is not an important enough issue for serious cooperation.*

Economically speaking, while still doing better than some other post-Soviet states, Russia has not been a big success, and Ukraine has been an economic disaster. Russia and Belarus do not currently have economic agreements with the EU. Economic integration with Russia would improve relations between the two sides, but greater integration would have to be in the form of a common economic space, as Russia could not become an EU member.

Some other suggestions for improving relations include: Russia respecting the sovereign decisions of other countries; fostering a common and inclusive notion of 'Europe'; a common security framework that includes Russia; developing a shared and integrated neighbourhood through economic interdependence; and using the growing threats of climate change as a basis for cooperation.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has been unsuccessful at improving dialogue between Russia and other European countries. The two sides talk past each other, giving monologues and not understanding the other side. In terms of cooperation on shared challenges, it appears that even the Covid-19 pandemic is not an important enough issue for serious cooperation. Russia also has its own unilateral strategies to combat climate change.

## **TRANSFORMATION IN CENTRAL ASIA**

When speaking of a post-Soviet space in Central Asia, to say that there is not would be to deny history and geography. Compared to the Baltic States, for instance, there is a much more visible Soviet legacy in Central Asia, a characteristic feature of which is hybridity, which includes formal and informal governance and institutions, as well as both socialist and capitalist

production mechanisms. It is also possible to speak of Central Asia as a clear and homogenous region in and of itself.

In 1991 the collapse strongly affected Central Asia. Many people had little to eat and the people who held land were in a much better position than others. With the opening of markets, the Central Asian countries have gone down different and diverging paths of development. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have a large wealth of natural resources, while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are poorer resource-wise. Kyrgyzstan was able to leave the economic depression after 1991 behind, but poverty and insecurity are still prevalent under the authoritarian regime. Post-Soviet identity in Central Asia is relational and depends on people's lived experiences; with the more rapid demographic turnover in Central Asia, the youth experience ever less of a connection to Soviet experiences.

Although the EU treats Central Asia as a region, the Central Asian states are in reality more disintegrated than integrated. The Central Asian countries vary in the degree to which they are consolidated authoritarian or free states. The EU has been present in all the Central Asian states since the 1990s and it has delegations present in all countries. The EU has diverse interests in the region, revolving mainly around energy

*The Central Asian states are currently questioning whether or not they should recognise and engage with the new Taliban government in Afghanistan.*

resources and security, and the EU is a normative actor, promoting a democratic space in the region. As a soft-power actor the EU has funded border management and integration projects, promoted regional security dialogue and fostered political dialogue and negotiation among Central Asian states and Afghanistan. The EU also has a strong economic presence in Central Asia. It has been Kazakhstan's top economic partner in recent years, and Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are both a part of the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preference (GSP+) framework for trade, giving them preferential access to the EU's single market, conditional upon fulfilment of certain criteria.

The recent crisis in Afghanistan has changed the security environment in Central Asia, leading to increased challenges. The Central Asian states are currently questioning whether or not they should recognise and engage with the new Taliban government in Afghanistan, though Tajikistan already rejected contact with the Taliban. Uzbekistan does have contacts with the Taliban and has invited representatives to Tashkent for discussions.

Security in Central Asia is multifaceted. The War in Afghanistan and the recent takeover by the Taliban presents a significant security threat to Central Asia, especially to those in close proximity to Afghanistan. There are already more than 15,000 refugees in Tajikistan, but there has thus far been no high-level meeting between EU and Central Asian leaders to discuss Afghanistan. Water security, too, is a significant security challenge, as well as border security. There is a strong regionalism dimension in Central Asia. One cannot separate the discussion into separate states – the wider region must be discussed when analysing these countries. The region has become a new geopolitical battlefield amongst the great powers; China, Russia and the United States all have strong interests in Central Asia, but for different reasons. It can be seen as a key area in the 'great game', with external great powers and the Central Asian states themselves playing various roles.

A key question in Central Asian security debates today is whether or not security can be effectively provided by the Common Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Russian-led security bloc that already includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Democracy is something of an alien concept in Central Asia. Although it is *de jure* recognised, in practice democratic governance in Central Asia is weak and the elites justify prolonging authoritarianism through security challenges.

Ecological issues and the climate emergency are high priorities in Central Asia. Since 2016 there have been consultative meetings between the heads of state of the Central Asian states. These consultative meetings have included clauses on the climate, including the drying up of the Aral Sea, for which an Aral Sea Salvation Committee was established. Such ecological issues require regional cooperation and they have become the main priorities in the Central Asian states' security visions, along with issues such as terrorism and extremism.

There is a somewhat superficial perception in Central Asia that a security umbrella can be provided by Russia and an economic umbrella can be provided by China. Relations with China are a growing concern, as the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has generated debate among Sinophiles and Sinophobes. But developments are ongoing and the space is not static. Relations with all neighbours are multifaceted, but it is security, in all its various forms, that dominates the geopolitical landscape.

Central Asia is standing at a crossroads, facing a dilemma on its future choices. The question remains for each country whether they should join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), or even whether the Central Asian states should form their own regional integration project, but the different models are exclusionary. For years integration was frozen, but there has been a breakthrough in cooperation. Overall, the security situation is very complex, and some big questions remain unanswered.

## **SOCIO-ECONOMIC LESSONS FROM LONG-TERM TRANSFORMATION**

The countries of the post-Soviet space since 1991 have, with some exceptions, been characterised as having populations with a higher quality of skills relative to the per capita income of the country. There is an imbalance, whereby the population are better skilled and educated than other developing countries, but the quality of governance is comparatively weaker than in other developing countries. There is a general trend that state ownership should be expanded in the developing world, and this is especially true in the former Soviet Union.

*It makes more sense to categorise the former Soviet Union into smaller regions.*

Over the last three decades there has been a convergence of the labour market towards lower-income countries, and there has been a large labour-market adjustment dependent on quality vs price. In Russia the labour market is comparatively fixed, meaning that price adjustments can lead to wages falling through the floor, but not necessarily to lower employment. Compared to Poland, for example, which has a more flexible labour force, meaning labour is more efficiently allocated while a more generous welfare state better supports the transfer of labour. As such, in



times of economic crisis it is Russian workers who bear the brunt, as the Russian government cannot cushion welfare losses in any major way.

Demographically speaking, it does to a certain extent make sense to refer to a ‘post-Soviet space’, but not including the Baltic States. It makes more sense to categorise the former Soviet Union into smaller regions: Baltic States; Eastern Europe; South Caucasus; Central Asia; and Russia. Some regions are experiencing a significant population decline, such as the Baltic States, Eastern Europe and parts of the South Caucasus, which have a higher mortality rate and lower fertility rates. In contrast, the populations of the Islamic former Soviet republics are growing, with fertility rate above the replacement rate of 2. In part, this could be due to the higher prevalence of traditional gender roles.

The role of migration in post-Soviet space demographics is also significant. In terms of international migration, Russia and Kazakhstan have been the largest migrant-receivers, due primarily to lower costs and the common language. Seasonal migration comes from Central Asia (primarily low-skilled workers in construction, trade, and service sector), and remittances from Russia make up a significant part of a number of post-Soviet economies. Moreover, there is a lot of temporary or permanent emigration from Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Armenia and Georgia, which also has a large impact on these countries’ demographics. On the other hand, internal migration, while not as dynamic as international migration, has resulted in large rural-to-urban migration, primarily to the capital cities. However, underdeveloped public services and a large skills gap, as well as violent conflict, are significant barriers to internal migration.

In 1991, overall levels of happiness in the former Soviet Union fell along with the fall in GDP per capita. There was a huge decline in life satisfaction until the mid-1990s, and although GDP per capita began increasing thereafter, levels of life satisfaction have been slower to catch up. One key factor that can help largely explain the disparity in levels of life satisfaction between advanced and developing economies has been the quality of institutions. Although the collapse of the USSR saw one of the biggest drops in living standards ever recorded, in some parts of the former Soviet Union former Communist Party members and their informants were better off than their counterparts, although in the Baltic States and Central and Eastern Europe this was the opposite.

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*The conference was held on 15-16 November 2021. The workshops took place under the Chatham House rule. They were attended by academics and policy experts from Eastern Europe, Central Asia, South Caucasus, Russia, and the EU. The panel discussion in the evening was open to the public. Its recording can be accessed [here](#). Other materials from the conference are available [here](#). The organizers would like to thank all participants for their active engagement and valuable inputs.*

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