

An Obituary for the Post-Soviet, 1991–2022

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Abstract

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, both the region and the period following this collapse have been widely characterised as post-Soviet. While there have been some liminal problematisation of the paradigm, it has been generally accepted both popularly and academically as some sort of qualifier for historiographical periodisation and study of this region in both scholarship and for policy-making. This chapter will argue that the post-Soviet is no more for two main reasons. First, Russia no longer wields soft power within the so-called post-Soviet space, and second, Russia is no longer incontestably viewed as the regional hegemon even within the region itself. Such a paradigm shift will have lasting implications for both regional studies and policy-making, but these changes can be guided and informed by the current processes that are playing out both societally and geopolitically in the former region.

Key words: Post-Soviet, Periodisation and categorisation, academic and policy discourse, Russia, Ukraine

Introduction

Periodisation is crucial to the study of history. It provides clear delineations of certain periods, categorisations and characteristics of certain countries or societies during these periods, and helps to explain certain narratives behind or causes of important events that change the course of history. In this way, periodisation is as well deeply linked with historiography. The events that delineate these periods, effectively providing the conditions for the before and the after, are seen to be so paradigmatic that they constitute natural divisions in the flow of history. Some examples of such periods are the pre-Columbian, that of Late Antiquity, the Renaissance, the Interwar Era, or, as is the focus of this chapter, the post-Soviet. After the official dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the post-Soviet period had begun. The

countries that had previously formed the fifteen constituent republics of the Soviet Union would bear this new post-Soviet moniker.

At the same time, however, such periodisation has effects beyond the study of history and of spatial understandings. In being used to categorise countries and societies in broader regimes of knowledge, it attaches certain uncontested connotations to actors within this configuration, privileging the roles of some actors while diminishing others. This phenomenon is especially true in both vernacular and scholarly uses of the post-Soviet as a descriptive term. Both academic programmes or journals or policy institutes that focus on post-Soviet affairs or the region would give Russia a central position not only structurally but discursively, frequently to the detriment of the other countries and societies put in the same category. Often in these discourses is the post-Soviet linked solely to Russia as its centre, marked certain proclivities toward corruption, lower standards of living, or other ways of othering these societies, countries, and cultures from either Western or global standards, affecting the production of knowledge and policies toward this broader region with these biases and stereotypes.

This chapter will argue that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022 marks the end of the post-Soviet period and a paradigm shift to a new, unfamiliar territory. The post-Soviet period was characterised by two main factors: Russian soft power in the space of the former Soviet Union paired with the implicit understanding of externally uncontested Russian hegemony in this area. After the war, neither of these two factors are fixed, meaning that the current configuration is something different. While uncovering this specific configuration is not the aim of the current chapter, it will nonetheless delve into what possibilities there are for future theorising and conceptualisation.

This chapter is structured in the following fashion. First, there will be a discussion of why Russian soft power and hegemony in the former Soviet Union were the two defining characteristics of the post-Soviet in both popular and academic terms. Next, a review of the events following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine will be presented to demonstrate why those two defining characteristics of the post-Soviet no longer can be relied upon currently. Finally, the chapter will conclude by discussing the implications of this paradigm shift not only for regional studies but also for policymaking.

What Constituted the Post-Soviet?

Before discussing why the post-Soviet epoch has ended, it is first necessary to delineate what made the post-Soviet the post-Soviet other than its foundational event, which was the collapse of the Soviet Union. From 1991 to 2022, the Russian Federation maintained dominance in the post-Soviet space through soft power paired with disciplinary – yet externally untested – uses of force. The only so-called post-Soviet states that were able to escape from such cycles were the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which had made overtures to European and transatlantic organisations from 1990–1991 onward, securing their membership in the European Union and in NATO in 2004. Nonetheless, they were still often categorised as liminally post-Soviet, despite the fact that they were characterised as the ‘internal West’ during the Soviet period itself.

In the post-Soviet period and post-Soviet space, Russian soft power was strengthened through a variety of different mechanisms, many of which were directly supported by the Russian Federation either through direct policy actions or through unofficial networks and substrata that were maintained after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The clearest example of this is the Russian language as the *lingua franca* in many of these societies, alongside shared historical memories including Second World War and the relative material progress of the late 1950s and 1960s in relation to the years both preceding and following them (Ironsides 2021).

Such narratives were often strengthened in Russian strategic communication or cultural diplomacy projects as well. Additionally, many of the elite of these newly independent states were educated in Soviet universities and were socialised in the Soviet bureaucratic system, as such able to maintain ties across borders and now in neighbouring countries. As Russia had served as the metropole in this previous pseudo-imperial system, it was now the unofficial nexus of communication and economic connectivity, despite inroads being made by other global actors. Support of leaders such as Aleksandr Lukashenko currently or Nursultan Nazarbayev in the past, as well as for break-away territories and regions also solidified its role as a patron for the authoritarian regimes that would come to be equivocated with the post-Soviet area.

At the same time, Russia tried to institute many organisations that would parallel institutions that had been either established in the West or globally to legitimise its position in the post-Soviet space based on new logics. The

Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) would technically mirror many of the same developments of the European Economic Community in institutional and legal terms, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) would emulate many of the same principles of collective defence similar to NATO, and the Confederation of Independent States (CIS) provided a legal framework that could have evolved along the same lines of a regional union in the same way as the European Union or ASEAN.

However, each of these novel formats did not truly run on any of the liberal institutionalist principles that had acted as both inspiration and impetus for these other organisations. The EEU and CIS would have had Russia dominate any governing bodies or would have any of the other members remain economically dependent on Russia, as in its current stead, 90 per cent of the GDP of the EEU comes from Russia (Lüdtke 2021). Even the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which held its 2022 summit in Samarkand, has only worked to maintain a Sino-Russia balance in a limited swath of Eurasia.

Nevertheless, the use of military force always remained should any country wish to break out of the post-Soviet orbit that had Russia as its centre of gravity. From 1991 onward, such examples of this can be found in Ichkeria, Georgia, and Ukraine, and additionally with the stationing of Russian soldiers either officially as in the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan as peacekeeping forces or in permanent bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to mediate in conflicts that Moscow saw occurring between its satellites. Additionally such frozen conflicts served Russian interests in keeping those countries locked in Russia's orbit, as such a situation would guarantee that these countries would remain dependent on Russia to maintain a balance of power that would allow for both state and elite survival while at the same time keeping these countries away from other international organisations such as the European Union or NATO that have the legal precondition of not having any outstanding territorial disputes in order to apply for accession. The model of *Russkiy Mir* had always been geocentric and most definitely not a *Pax Rossica*.

Why has the Post-Soviet Ended?

At the beginning of 2022, Russia's position within the post-Soviet region seemed almost incontestable. The CSTO mission in Kazakhstan (Satubaldina 2022) – with Russian forces quickly deploying and withdrawing from the country after the mission as agreed upon – seemed to hint that Russia was more entrenched in the region than it had been for years, ready to reassert its hegemony. Even in the first days of the war against Ukraine did many pundits forward this view, projecting three days to Kyiv before Russia would force a regime change, and like with past uses of its military might, would revert back to a business as usual situation with the EU and the wider West. However, as those three days to Kyiv (Sciutto and Williams 2022) extended to three weeks, three months, and then a total withdrawal on that specific axis of advance, it was clear that previous prognoses regarding Russia were distorted or outright wrong.

The extended war – which galvanised the Ukrainian population and led to an unprecedented level of transatlantic solidarity – blew away the credibility of any Russian soft power in Central and Eastern Europe. What popular support Russia had previously enjoyed in Ukraine had been wiped away in a matter of days, with citizens of occupied Kharkiv yelling “Muscovites go home” at the Russian forces in Muscovite-accented Russian, and similar situations could be seen in the Baltic states and Moldova with only a vocal minority of Z-invasion supporters being visible compared to how loud support of the Kremlin had been from certain groups in the past. Soft power at gunpoint is no longer soft power, but a choice of either forced assimilation or violent extermination. Support of the Russian invasion, instead of being found in other former territories of the Soviet Union, was to be found with the Western far left and far right, based on ideological and propaganda narratives.

The shift away from the Russian cultural and historical sphere continued to occur at lightning speed in the following months, and not only in Ukraine. What remained of Soviet monuments were removed from public space in Estonia with the T-34 being removed from Narva (ERR News 2022) and Soviet era obelisk representing the ‘liberation’ of Latvia was removed in Riga (DW 2022). Moldova and Georgia made their ambitions to join the European Union absolutely clear (European Commission 2022a; 2022b), Kazakhstan has refused to expel its ‘equal strategic partners’ (i.e., the Ukrainian diplomatic corps) at the Kremlin's behest (Reuters 2022a),

and Uzbekistan ordered its citizens not to take part on the side of Russia (Temirov 2022), all asserting their own agency outside of Moscow's plans. In each of the wider regions outside of the Muscovite metropole, ties to the Soviet past or connections with contemporary Russia were loosening.

This loss of control spiralled also on to the geopolitical level, resulting also in Russia's role as regional hegemon being contested both by outside actors and by those states that also used to be dependent on it for security guarantees or dependent on the so-called order that Russia provided in the international system. The most striking example of this is the renewal of the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict over disputed territories that began on 13 September 2022. Not only did Armenia call on CSTO forces to come to its aid in projecting its territorial integrity to be directly denied by Russia, but Azerbaijani forces levelled an FSB outpost that was to be housing 'peace-keeping' forces stationed in Armenia. As such, Russia either had neither the interest nor the ability to protect its satellite state in the South Caucasus nor even the ability to strike back against a direct attack against its own forces. As a result, not only have Azerbaijan and Armenia come to negotiations, but even a mutually agreeable border settlement could be in place by the end of 2022 (Reuters 2022b). Such a situation would have been unthinkable in a previous context.

This is not the only instance of the South Caucasus region turning completely against Russia. At the same time, party chairman Irakli Kobakhidze of the Georgian Dream has called for a public referendum on the retaking of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Menabde 2022), two regions that were wrested away from Tbilisi as a result of the 2008 war with Russia. Like the situation between Azerbaijan and Armenia, such a shift in public rhetoric toward either animosity or indifference toward Russia demonstrates that the credibility of Russia as a regional hegemon has been destroyed, with states that previously were deferential to Moscow now openly defying it. This process is also ongoing in Central Asia as well, as exemplified by the renewed armed conflicts between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over exclaves that, such as in the case of the other border conflicts in the territory of the former Soviet Union, had been instrumentalised to cement Russia's role as mediator and hegemon. Further evidence of Russia's waning influence in the regions is marked by Armenia and Kyrgyzstan's refusal to participate in the CSTO 'Indestructible Brotherhood-2022' training exercises (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2022a). Comments by Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon stating that Russia should "respect" each of its neighbours as they

are not the “former Soviet Union” only underlines this trend (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2022b).

However, equal to the agency asserted by all of these states and societies in the former post-Soviet area in challenging Russian hegemony is the transatlantic community finally doing the same with a higher degree of solidarity. The brutalities of the Second Chechen War were treated as a domestic issue within Russia. The violations of international law and the dismemberment of Georgia were condemned, but it took little time to go back to business as normal. The 2014 occupation of Crimea and the Donbas yield similar results – short-term condemnation followed by a slow return to a new normality in relations. Each of these situations occurred because of an implicit understanding from a substantial portion of Western capitals that Russia had a right to project its power in the countries as they constituted something akin to a sphere of influence. Only with the 2022 invasion would this implicit right to hegemony in area of the former Soviet Union be challenged when both NATO and the European Union would come together in solidarity to directly send weapons and enact a full package of sanctions to truly show that such actions on the side of the Russian Federation would be completely unacceptable. Now while certain members of both the transatlantic and European communities have pushed against a fully punitive regime against Russia, the overall position of both NATO and the EU is unprecedented.

Not only have Western nations become brasher with Russia, directly pushing back against its claims of an unquestionable sphere of influence in not only words but deeds, but China has also become more assertive after the war against Ukraine. As Putin and Xi met during the SCO summit in Samarkand, the comments made clear that Russia would remain deferential to China in Central Asia if there was any sort of conflict of interest. Even in the publicly released discussions, Putin acted as Xi’s inferior, lavishing his ‘comrade’ with respectful language and promising to assuage any ‘concerns’ regarding the conflict in Ukraine that Beijing apparently had (Kuczyński 2022). While this shift is not toward the protection of a rules-based international order in the same way that the Western reaction against the war in Ukraine is, it nonetheless represents a contestation of Russia’s post-Soviet sphere of influence in Central Asia from China, which Russia has reluctantly accepted in a public format.

Implications

By any vestiges of Russian soft power having been wiped away and Russia losing its uncontested hegemony in the post-Soviet space – by both losing credibility in its pseudo-institutional organs of power and being challenged regionally by former deferential states now going out to forge their own, diverging policies based on national interest – the post-Soviet as both a periodisation and a regional moniker has also been demolished. The geopolitical pressures in the region will only rise while at the same time domestic pressures within Russia could very well reproduce those same dynamics of disintegration at home. Even the most conservative predictions of the near future would reconsider the ability of Russia to project its power in its former ‘near abroad’ without having any significant pushback from either the countries in each of those regions or great powers on the global scale.

The focus of the post-Soviet paradigm was having Russia as the connective logic among each of the countries in the former post-Soviet region, and this focus on Russia had in fact blinded many policy-makers and scholars to alternative explanatory frameworks and other variables that could have served to provide a wider understanding of the regional processes, and as such, these alternative viewpoints would have provided a more holistic picture in which the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, along with genocidal practices in the occupied areas, would not have been unthinkable.

This post-post-Soviet should therefore not centre Russia as it did before, but instead look to state and societal perspectives from the former region instead of just those of the Moscow officialdom and those who have studied it. This implies also a more structural change has to happen globally, similar to the decolonialising approach that has been suggested for post-Soviet studies (Koplatadze 2019; Zarakol 2011), wherein the topic would become relegated to history departments, and policy-making centres, think tanks, and research institutions would then reformulate their strategies around focusing the studies of the former post-Soviet region on the specific countries and societies that constituted it without filtering them first through the lens of Russia or the Soviet Union. In this way, let there be a proliferation of regions, whether that be the Pontic, the Transoxianian, the Trancaucasian, or even in the case of Russia and Belarus’, the markedly neo-Soviet.

However, these transformations of mentality do not mean that Russia will become any less relevant or any more predictable than it has been previously. Contemporary Russia, with its locus of regime power tightly wound

within and around the Kremlin, has depended on its legitimacy coming from the projection of Russian power abroad in order to create a sense of national pride at home. In fact, as this influence wanes, Russia may be apt to more armed adventurism, aggressive actions, and other 'special military operations' wherein victory may be more assured than it was in the case of Ukraine in order to give Moscow a face-saving, glory-building victory. If and when such a conflict does arise, let there not be again headlines from articles or policy reports that talk about how unthinkable or surprising such an action was.

In the same way that the 24th of February marked the beginning of the end of the post-Soviet period, let it also mark the beginning of a new era wherein the countries that were unfortunately lumped into this post-Soviet region are given their own voice and centrality in global discourses, since for them, unfortunately, the 24th of February was no surprise.

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