

FAREWELL TO IMAGINED POST-SOVIETNESS. IS IT STILL JUSTIFIED TO USE THE TERM 'POST-SOVIET'?

Extract from a discussion, organised by AREI, held on 27 October 2022 at the University of Helsinki as part of the 21st Annual Aleksanteri Conference, "The New Era of Insecurity: How Russia's War in Ukraine Changes the World".

ŁUKASZ ADAMSKI: I welcome you to a discussion on the legitimacy of using the term ‘post-Soviet’, which dominates social science and political discourse and is used to denote states that were once part of the Soviet Union. However, more than 30 years have passed since the collapse of this union, so what cognitive value does this term carry today? What arguments can be made for and against its use? This is what we will discuss with eminent researchers from former post-Soviet countries: Dr Botakoz Kassymbekova from Basel University; Prof. Kataryna Wolczuk from the University of Birmingham; Wojciech Konończuk, director of the Centre for Eastern Studies in Warsaw; and Dr Ernest Wyciszkiewicz, director of the Mieroszewski Centre for Dialogue in Warsaw.

BOTAKOZ KASSYMBEKOVA: Periodization and chronologies are not neutral or innocent scientific tools for dividing historical periods. They are, as Sebastian Conrad argued, “devised to think the world”. They construct perceptions (of the past and the present), and they are made with claims (e.g., modernity or post-modernity), which has a direct influence on how we interpret and imagine regions, nations, and communities. Therefore, they are deeply political and are usually embedded in European teleologies. The term ‘post-Soviet’ illustrates the political coinage and usage perfectly. It is obscure and yet telling at the same time. It reflects the confusion over whether post-Sovietness is a spatial or a temporal reference. Does ‘post-Soviet’ refer to a region or a time period? Does it mean that either the Soviet system or the fact that these regions used to belong to the empire really matter? Does it highlight the social and political problems of postcolonialism, or does it classify a region as belonging to a certain political center? It is also an external category that is ascribed from outside of Central Asia. In this region, I think it is rare to find an institute or journal of post-Soviet studies. Some habit or way of thinking can be described as Soviet within Central Asia when referring to violence or repression, but ‘Soviet’ is not an identity to strive for. The fact that ‘post-Soviet’ is an external category signifies not only the poverty of Western Academia’s political imagination, but also the marginal position it affords to regions to claim or defend their own periodization and description.

If we look at the term ‘Sovietness’ from a decolonial perspective, it flattens hierarchies. It is just one time and one space. It obliterates the colonial and the coloniality of the Soviet regime. This term flattens hierarchies, and just as the term ‘Soviet’ obliterates a centralized empire, ‘post-Sovietness’ obliterates the imperial regime behind it. It also obliterates the diverse paths that former colonies took after the end of the Soviet imperial rule. Some decided to end post-Sovietness; some did not. In that

sense, post-Sovietness is a decision. If we look at it as a process in which actors and their decisions play a role, then we will get a more complex but also clearer picture. For example, I look at education in Kazakhstan or Tajikistan, neither of which have undergone reform. In these cases, these are retained Soviet structures, so I would say these are very post-Soviet. However, if I look at cultural identities, for example, it is evident that they are not post-Soviet. For Kazakhstan, overcoming Sovietness would mean a successful revolution (or reform) in order to re-write the constitution and establish a representative government elected by the people. The current leadership is still the leadership nurtured in the Soviet context; it relies on Soviet logic and institutions for governance. As the January 2022 uprising showed, there are expressions of people's will to build a political nation, but it remains to be seen whether Kazakhstan will succeed in building a political nation or will remain a post-Soviet colony that retains Soviet structures of rule based on personalized rule and violence for its subjugation.

KATARYNA WOLCZUK: When I think about what the post-Soviet concept denotes, I have to go back to the explanation of the collapse of the USSR. The Soviet Union was a developmental empire that delivered mismodernization. Although it was a very comprehensive state that controlled every aspect of primary societal forms – such as the educational system, in which graduates were sent to different parts of the USSR – this state was shallow. It literally collapsed in terms of its capacity to deliver public goods.

So, what we have now is also post-Sovietness; different disciplines treat this phenomenon differently, but it shows a very fuzzy legacy of mismodernization. When I think about 'post-Soviet', this legacy comes to the fore of informal networks and practices. It was complicated to do good things and undertake reform in the post-Soviet states, but it was relatively easy to do bad things, like rent extraction.

So, we use concepts of neo-factionalist, clientelist, rent extraction, and limited access order, but these are all somehow imperfect; therefore, we have to recognize that there is something common between these countries.

And another aspect. We have been talking about the post-Soviet space, which has always been a hub. So, what we have is the Soviet legacy of interactions between post-Soviet space countries, usually taking place via Moscow. Moscow wants to be a gatekeeper to Ukraine and all other former Soviet republics, such as Moldova and Georgia, which still have very few horizontal interactions between each other. This is especially visible

in bodies like the Eurasian Economic Union, which is effectively about bilateral trade between the member states and Russia, but not actually between, let's say, Armenia and Belarus. So, there is a sort of very Soviet tradition of Moscow and Russia acting as the gatekeeper to the post-Soviet space. This is another aspect of what we regard as post-Sovietness, but it is perhaps the most interesting one, and the war has really challenged it.

WOJCIECH KONOŃCZUK: The Russian aggression against Ukraine is actually a crucial moment in the discussion about post-Sovietness because the disintegration of the post-Soviet area is ongoing before our eyes. I would argue that notions such as a post-Soviet area, a post-Soviet region, or post-Soviet states raise more questions than they answer. These are very misleading terms because we are talking about huge regions that had not been under Russian rule for long. Let's remember that some lands that belonged to the Russian Empire before the First World War were united or conquered by the Russian Empire only in the late nineteenth century. I'm talking about, e.g., part of Tajikistan. For most of the history of these regions of these countries, they were not part of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. So, what we are actually observing is that, since 1991, the territory of the former Soviet Union has transformed into historical macro-regions that are completely different. We see a very different story in Central Asia, in the Caucasus, and in Eastern Europe.

Another interesting argument we started to hear from Ukrainian decision-makers and intellectuals – even before the full-scale Russian aggression – is that Ukraine should be treated as part of Central Europe rather than Eastern Europe. For example, in October or September 2021, Dmytro Kuleba, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, made a program statement that argued: “do not treat us as part of the Eastern Europe region, because our tradition, our history, our political culture is part of the Central European region rather than something that is perceived as part of the traditional Russian Security Sphere of influence”.

So, why is there actually a widespread perception of the region (which for some decades was part of the Soviet Union) as a post-Soviet area? I would respond that this is a consequence of a lack of knowledge.

However, there is a broader problem. When we look at Western historiography on Russia and the Russian Empire, we discover that – at least until recent times – it has been very much focused on Russia (the history of Russia, the history of the Soviet Union, the history of Russians).

I have many arguments for why we should not use the term ‘post-Sovietness’. Let me present some of them, starting with political systems.

We are talking about 15 countries with very different political systems: from fully-fledged democratic systems to democracy with some problems, like Armenia or Moldova. Then we have very different types of authoritarian systems. For example, the political system in Kazakhstan is different from that of Tajikistan. Regarding Russia, the systems we can observe there are no longer authoritarian. We should instead call it a totalitarian system.

Another point is these 15 nations' foreign policies, which have become clearly visible in the last decade or so. I'm referring to the fact that these nations' foreign policies now exclude Russia as a dominant power. This process has accelerated since 24 February 2022, when the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine started

Then we have different economic models, from fully-fledged capitalist systems to centrally planned economies.

Finally, let's remember the Russification process and the different statuses of the Russian language in post-Soviet countries. We see interesting figures if we look at recent data from the Pushkin Institute in Moscow that compares how many school children and students were educated in the Russian language in 1991 and in 2020. In 1991, 9.5 million students studied in the Russian language outside the Russian Federation, but by 2020 this number had decreased to 4.1 million. So, basically, the region has been de-Russified step-by-step.

ŁUKASZ ADAMSKI: Thank you, Wojciech, for these excellent points. I entirely agree with you and especially with your last statement about the role of the Russian language since the war started. I have visited Kyiv many times since 24 February, and what struck me was the significant reduction in the use of the Russian language in public spaces. This change is absolutely obvious for those who have visited Kyiv since the war started.

ERNEST WYCISZKIEWICZ: Let me begin my personal experience when I started to think the term 'post-Soviet' was truly dead. The first moment was Putin's conversation with CIS leaders on 9 December 2019. I usually don't watch this kind of event, but it was an exceptional one because the Russian president was about to deliver his analysis of the role of Poles and Poland in the Second World War. It was a lecture for about an hour given to the leaders of CIS countries. We could see from their faces that they were not very interested. They looked bored; they didn't know what was going on. They didn't understand why he wanted to impose this version of history on them. The second moment came in the summer of 2020,

when Belarusian society reacted strongly to the rigged presidential elections, calling into question the cliché about itself allegedly being an emanation of post-Sovietism. I must confess that I used to be a victim of this intellectual inertia as well, as using this term was simply convenient for analysis. If you don't have a lot of time or you want to cover something quickly, then you look for some keywords that can be easily grasped by the public, and their obscurity and lack of precision can be useful as 'space-filler'.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 are the final nails in the coffin of the post-Soviet space. This ongoing process has almost come to an end before our eyes. Thus, the term can be declared dead.

When we hear people saying 'post-Soviet', we tend not to go deeper and try to understand who these people are and why they use it. And scholars need to keep in mind that this is a political term with many political ramifications. So, if you use it, then you have a certain political message to deliver. Even if you are a scholar and you do this, you might think that you are just trying to understand and explain, but you also indirectly deliver a political message by trying to frame the region as something consolidated, unified, more or less homogeneous. So, that's the first point.

Now, my second and last point. Let's think instrumentally. If we assume that this is still a useful concept and we should use it, what does it give us that we cannot get using other notions? What is so special about it? And if you ask this question this way, I think it will be (at least, it is for me) very difficult to find a positive answer. How does the term 'post-Soviet' help me as an analyst today to understand what has been happening from Kaliningrad up to Vladivostok, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus? Actually, it doesn't help at all. However, I admit that sometimes I still use this term because old habits die hard – the inertia of language is powerful – therefore abandoning the use of this concept requires effort. So, let me put an end here to these general remarks.

ŁUKASZ ADAMSKI: I actually have two questions. Do the countries you are investigating as Central Asian states or Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Moldova – identify themselves as post-Soviet or not? And another question, perhaps of even higher importance, is what can scholars do? I'm referring to those who disagree with the term 'post-Soviet'. What can be done to change this dominant perception in Western

academia that there are, let's say, post-Soviet countries or lands of historic Russia.

BOTAKOZ KASSYMBEKOVA: Although I'm not a political scientist, in the context of the January 2022 uprising in Kazakhstan I had to give a lot of interviews for the German-speaking media, simply because nobody in Germany or Switzerland knew anything about Kazakhstan. The term 'post-Sovietness' invites you to not pay attention to other countries except Russia. However, it is not enough to know the Russian language to understand the region. Studying the region with only the help of the Russian language means that one will have a Russocentric view of it because the huge narrative that is available only in its native languages would be missed. We need to learn other languages (Kazakh, Uzbek, Georgian, etc.), which is a huge challenge.

ERNEST WYCISZKIEWICZ: I don't believe Russians consider themselves post-Soviet, especially younger generations. But this notion is useful for the regime, and this usefulness has been changing over time. In the 1990s, the CIS – the Commonwealth of Independent States – was seen in Moscow as a method to control former Soviet republics. At the same time, in the 1990s CIS was already a tool for peaceful divorce between Central Asia and Ukraine. So, the people knew they could not emancipate quickly, therefore they looked at CIS as a way to move away from each other in a gradual and orderly manner.

Although Moscow used to perceive CIS as a consolidation tool, now Putin and his regime seem to be sort of postmodern when it comes reconstructing something that cannot be the Soviet Union as it was, but the Kremlin can make political use of Soviet legacy. I don't believe that Putin wants to recreate the Soviet Union. It is something else. And he no longer thinks about the post-Soviet area as something that can be re-established as a homogeneous thing. I believe that the concept of *Ruski Mir* is sort of his response to this concept; however, it actually contradicts the post-Soviet concept because it emphasizes the role of Russian-speaking people, and the Russian ethnic space (as seen by him) is considered something that should be under Russian control, for historical or other reasons.

WOJCIECH KONOŃCZUK: I would say that almost all post-Soviet nations no longer perceive themselves as post-Soviet and do not want this term to be applied to them. Suppose we focus on different countries, starting from Ukraine and Moldova. We'll see that there is a concept that both

these countries were part of the broader Central European region or, in the case of Moldova, even the wider Balkan region. As I have mentioned, in the program statement by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, he said that we [Ukrainians] need to get back to Central Europe, since Ukraine is and has always been a central European state historically, politically, and culturally. Central Europe is where our [Ukrainian] identity belongs.

Since 24 February 2022, we can find many more arguments for the accuracy of Kuleba's statements. The same is even more obvious in the Caucasus. Let's remember how old these states are, mainly Georgia and Armenia: both accepted Christianity almost 1,000 years before the city of Moscow was established. They don't have to prove anything.

And finally, what we have observed in the last three decades is a gradual disintegration of something that used to be a Russian colony. This disintegration process is very different than the disintegration of the British or French colonial empires. Still, the notion of Russia being a colonial power is relatively new to Western analytical approaches.

As for the second question raised by Lukasz: what should be done? It's quite apparent we should not use the terms 'post-Soviet' or 'post-Sovietness'; instead, we should use the names of the regions: Central Asia, the Caucasus, Eastern or Central-Eastern Europe.

KATARYNA WOLCZUK: 'Post-Soviet' means making generalizations across the Soviet successor states, whereas fewer and fewer areas are united by one thing, even when it comes to the role of Russia and Russian foreign policy. So, even in terms of the role of Russia, we cannot generalize because it's a very complex picture. So, we went from this convenience – basically ambivalence and obscurity – to the realization that this term is politically loaded. It's not neutral. The challenge is: what are the alternatives? I have to engage with concepts such as the 'Eastern Partnership' (EaP), the 'Eastern Neighbourhood' and the 'Western Balkans'. All these umbrella terms are also flawed. But what do Croatia and Albania have in common?

ŁUKASZ ADAMSKI: The Croatians hate this concept, of course.

KATARYNA WOLCZUK: Exactly. So, while I'm trying to differentiate the post-Soviet space, I'm replicating those biases and generalizations.

Voice from the audience. I was surprised that there is still a question about whether we should use this whole post-Soviet concept. It is a legacy of a certain perception of the Soviet Union. And it's an easy and

lazy concept. It's obvious that we shouldn't use the concept of post-Soviet. Let me talk about Kazakhstan or Georgia, or Ukraine. But should we use post-socialism? For Poland, for Hungary?

ŁUKASZ ADAMSKI: What I can add on my side is that we have a problem with the terms 'post-communist country' and 'new EU member states'. Poland, for example, has 18 years in the EU; Finland, I think 27; but Finland is a mature EU member, and Poland is a new EU member state. And there are lots of similar examples of inertial thinking, both in the academic community and in political discourse.

KATARYNA WOLCZUK: When we talked about the Commonwealth of Independent States, for example, as the organizing framework in the 1990s, very few people registered that Ukraine was never a fully-fledged member of CIS because it never ratified it. There is one more aspect which I found very, very interesting. The post-Soviet space concept includes the Baltic countries, where – from the Russian perspective – international law doesn't operate and doesn't apply. These countries are perceived as being outside of international law, not only in terms of multilateral UN agreements, but also in terms of actual bilateral agreements.

WOJCIECH KONONCZUK: Yes. One of the many paradoxes regarding post-Sovietness is that nations that are now called post-Soviet didn't want to be part of Soviet Russia, the Soviet Union. The Soviets conquered them. Now they don't want to be called post-Soviet, but they're called post-Soviet. So, for me, this is like an explanation of the Russian special right, the Russian special role.

I don't think that if the Russian Federation collapsed, the nations which would emerge would be called post-Russian. Because what unites Poland and Finland is that they were part of the same state for more than a century, but nobody called Poland or Finland post-Russian states after 1918, right? Rather, they are post-imperial states. So, we should be careful in using this concept.

ERNEST WYCISZKIEWICZ: I believe the huge challenge for intellectuals and scholars is to leave their ivory towers. It is important to publish books and deconstruct or reconstruct the notion of post-Sovietness, but it is equally or even more important to reach out to the public and explain that terms and frames matter. The public needs to be aware that

the way you use certain words has significant political ramifications. And we have to be careful.

Experts and analysts should be less interested in putting things in order just for the sake of intellectual clarity; they should think more in terms of complexity as the world is chaotic and our societies are messy by their nature.

BOTAKOZ KASSYMBEKOVA: I will reemphasize that these terminologies might be imperial. When I go to the United States, I say: “I’m from Kazakhstan”. The usual response is: “Oh, Russian”. But I’m not Russian. It’s part of that process of reconsidering. It’s part of that process of disempowering. It’s part of giving a voice so diversity and coloniality can be revised. So, this kind of thinking is a very colonial practice, and what we’re doing now is decolonization in that sense. Hopefully, more people will start to understand that. We do need to influence the narrative, and we need to explain why this term is inappropriate. We need to coin new terms instead.

Edited by ŁUKASZ ADAMSKI