Challenging the 'Post-Soviet' Label and Colonial Mindsets

NATO Summit in Vilnius

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The international discourse long depended on the term 'post-Soviet' to refer to the 15 sovereign states that emerged and re-emerged from the Soviet Union following its dissolution in 1991. The list includes European and Asian countries with contrasting backgrounds: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. Rooted in the context of the Cold War, the term fails to capture the crucial ongoing metamorphosis and challenges of these states for the past thirty years. For Lithuania and the Baltic region at least, the NATO Summit in Vilnius in July 2023 is a chance to emphasize the strong European identity and to challenge the deep colonial mindsets, which overlooks Eastern European perspectives in favor of those built in Moscow since the beginning of the 20th century.

Unmasking the colonial meaning of the term 'post-Soviet'

In April 2023, China's ambassador to France questioned the 'former Soviet countries' status in international law:

> *"In international law, even these ex-Soviet Union countries do not have the status, the effective [status] in international law, because there is no international agreement to materialize their status as a sovereign country."*

The comments sparked outrage in Europe (Czech Republic, Germany, European Commission, etc.), in particular among the three Baltic states – Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia – which were the first to break away from the USSR between March and May 1990, claiming continuity from the original states that existed prior to their annexation by USSR in 1940. These comments contradicted China's official stance, which recognized the independence of the Baltic states in 1991, as well as the status of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which were invited the 'first China-Central Asia summit', scheduled for May 2023. As the result, the Chinese government was forced to clarify the controversial remarks made by its ambassador.

The comments also illustrates the colonial mindset based on the denial of the right of self-determination, a key principle that denotes the legal right of people to decide their own destiny in the international order. More importantly, the denial of the self-determination right is the essence of Russia's war in Ukraine: it echoes the long-lasting Kremlin narrative about the allegedly 'non-legitimate' states, which emerged after the collapse of Russian Empire in 1917. After WWI, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland became independent states, but some other states (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia and Ukraine) were destroyed by the Bolsheviks in 1920-1921. The Baltic states became the target of Soviet expansion once again in 1940, using a particular interpretation of history that is still vivid today: the USSR took the view that the legitimate post-1917 governments in the Baltic states had not been the ones with which they had negotiated peace treaties in 1920, but rather Bolsheviks who had been toppled by 'bourgeois democratic' regimes. Accordingly, everyone involved in governing the Baltic states between 1918

and 1940 was seen by USSR as having played a role in an illegal usurpation of Soviet power.

In the Baltic states, Soviet colonialism (sovietization) was a systematic and comprehensive project, comprising the following elements: a) introduction of USSR administrative and economic systems; b) subjugation of states to the economic and political needs of the USSR; c) militarization; d) colonization of states (especially Latvia) by hundreds of thousands of Russian-speaking immigrants; e) destruction of traditional social structure through genocide and Russification; f) total control over internal means of communication and contacts with foreign countries; i) destruction of established political, economic and cultural traditions.

The imperial ambitions by Putin resumed the denial of the right of self-determination in the 21st century and led to territorial claims against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine since 2014. In June 2022, after months of denying that Russia is driven by imperial ambitions in Ukraine, Putin appeared to embrace that mission, comparing Tsar Peter's campaign with Russia's current military actions. Putin's February 21 speech referred explicitly to restoring not the Soviet Union, which he criticized in various ways, but the Russian empire as it existed prior to 1917. After these comments, Russia's neighbors cannot expect that they won't be targeted. Thus, the very recent comments by Medvedev suggesting that Finland is not really a country and was 'created by Lenin by mistake' should be no surprise either. Following this notion, no country close to Russia is 'real', except Russia itself.

The term 'post-Soviet' was also effortlessly adopted in the Western discourse and is still used widely in many contexts, denying the fundamental changes after the Cold War era. As Latvian diplomat Argita Daudze stressed in 2022, Lithuania, like Estonia and Latvia, cannot be called 'post-Soviet' from the Western standpoint mainly because that they lost their independence and were incorporated into the USSR against their free will and their incorporation into the USSR was not recognized by the Western countries. While rebuilding their statehoods in the 1990s, all Baltic states legitimized themselves with a reference to the period of independence between 1918 and 1940 to negate and overcome the legacy of the Soviet regime. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania rejected the Soviet regime as illegal and considered the years under Soviet rule as occupation. Thus, any denial of the criminality of the foundations of the Soviet regime was considered as undermining the legal continuity of the Baltic states and their legitimacy. After entering EU in 2004, all Baltic states have faced the dilemma of transmitting and explaining their Soviet memories to the European audience. The mindscape is changing slowly, as in the 2000s it was still normal (as it sometimes still is) to address the Baltic states as 'post-Soviet' rather than as European countries within public discourse.

In addition, the Baltic states cannot be called 'post-Soviet', because they are not successor states of the USSR. Russia as the legal successor of the Soviet Union *de jure* and *de facto*. Moreover, consideration must be given to the fact that Lithuania traces its statehood to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (1236-1569) and a common state with Poland in the case of Lithuania (1569-1795). For Lithuania, the Declaration of the Republic in February 1918, following the WWI, was a renewal of statehood, not the establishment of an independent state, as it was for Latvia, Estonia, and a few other new European nations. Considering the history of Lithuania, it is more than odd to refer to the country as 'post-Soviet'. The Soviet occupation lasted fifty years, which was brief compared to the length of time the Lithuanian state existed as a Kingdom and Duchy.

Alternatives for the 'post-Soviet' label

This term is so deeply rooted that it is still used unconsciously by Baltic states themselves. Nevertheless, after thirty years of the collapse of USSR and the ongoing post-imperial war in Ukraine, it is time to look for more precise alternatives to be able to handle the current security crisis in the region better. Under the geographical classification by the UN, the Baltic states are considered Nordic European at least since 2002, together with Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom. The Eastern European countries are considered to be Belarus, Bulgaria,

Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, and Ukraine.

However, the geographical classification fails to tackle the political notion of the Baltic states. New terms identifying the Baltic states and other re-emerged states should address at least the major political, economic, social and culture progress since 1991. In the political sphere, only the Baltic countries managed to build a full-fledged system of liberal democracy. For example, according to Freedom House's Global Freedom Scores 2022, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are considered to be free countries. Similarly, the Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders in 2022 recorded the following as regards press freedom: Estonia – 'Good situation,' Latvia, Lithuania – 'Satisfactory situation'. Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia also scored the highest among 'former USSR states' in the Human Development Index scores in 2021. According to the Economic Freedom of the World Index, the Baltic States' economies have the highest levels of economic freedom in all of Eastern Europe. From the economic low point in 1995 to 2017, Estonia's economic freedom rose from 53 to 13, Latvia's rose from 77 to 24 and Lithuania rose from 82 to 16. Meanwhile, the states, which re-emerged in Eurasia are 'frozen in time,' as democratic progress is not so visible.

Two alternative concepts could be suggested to replace the outdated term of 'post-Soviet': 'desovietizing countries' or 'former Sovietized countries.' The title of the 'desovietizing countries' places an emphasis on the process of consciously distancing oneself from the influence and structures of the USSR. It exposes the actions that some countries have made to reinvent their political, economic, and social institutions in order shake off the Soviet legacies. More importantly, this term acknowledges the agency that exists inside these countries and the active pursuit of change. On the other hand, the title 'former Sovietized countries' emphasizes more on the historical and structural legacy of Soviet rule in the countries that were formerly under Soviet control. It draws attention to the historical context and the ongoing problems that these countries face in detaching themselves from the vestiges of the Soviet system by utilizing this word. Understanding the differences among these three terms is crucial in unraveling the complexities of power shifts within the region. The term 'post-Soviet' tends to gloss over the agency and intricacies of these countries, frequently equating them to a homogenous' group that has been frozen in time. In contrast, 'desovietizing countries' and 'former Sovietized countries' place a greater emphasis on the dynamic processes of change and the historical contexts that have molded their power structures in the current day.

Perspectives

Rejecting the title 'post-Soviet' would not only contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the region, but also to an acknowledgment that the different experiences of the Baltic states and other Eastern European nations precede the Soviet era (1940-1990). It is also a crucial step toward fostering a more inclusive and accurate understanding of their intricate narratives. Abandoning the 'post-Soviet' paradigm is also an essential step toward decolonizing the international mindset on those countries, which emerged or re-emerged after 1990. A more sophisticated understanding of the ongoing transformation is made possible by the introduction of new terms such as 'desovietizing countries' or/and 'former Sovietized countries.' By appreciating the achievements of Baltic states in the post-Soviet era, it would be possible to acquire the elements that have contributed to their progress as well as the particular challenges encountered by other countries in the region.

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