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The End of the Soviet World?

Essays on Post-Communist Political and Social Change

With an afterword by Richard Butterwick

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THE END OF THE SOVIET WORLD?

ESSAYS ON POST-COMMUNIST POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Three Revolutions Volume IV

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The "Three Revolutions" (3R) research project has been carried out since 2015 by the Chair of European Civilization at the College of Europe in Natolin. In the first phase of the project (2015-2019) we primarily focused on the process of social and political mobilisation in Ukraine since 1990. Specifically, our analysis was centred on the three revolutions: the 1990 Revolution on Granite, the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2013-2014 Revolution of Dignity. During this stage we collected over 100 verbal testimonies from direct participants in all three revolutionary events in Ukraine. The interviews were completed by testimonies given during three historical workshops which were based on the Cold War Project model and organised in 2017 at the College of Europe campus in Natolin where the first international symposium on Three Ukrainian Revolutions was held. The findings from this workshop were verified again during the second and third symposia, which were held at the Natolin campus in 2018 and 2019 respectively.

The outcomes of this stage of the project included a three-volume publication, with the first two volumes published in 2019. The first volume, titled *Three Revolutions: Mobilisation and Change in Contemporary Ukraine I: Theoretical Aspects and Analyses on Religion, Memory, and Identity*, was edited by Paweł Kowal, Georges Mink and Iwona Reichardt. It includes articles by international experts and scholars on topics related to the revolutionary events that have unfolded in Ukraine since 1990. The second volume, titled *Three Revolutions: Mobilization and Change in Contemporary Ukraine II: An Oral History of the Revolution on Granite, Orange Revolution, and Revolution of Dignity*, was edited by Paweł Kowal, Georges Mink, Iwona Reichardt and Adam Reichardt. It presents interviews with participants and eyewitnesses of the events in Ukraine and documents a series of workshop discussions conducted at the symposium held in 2017. The third volume, published in 2022, is titled *Three Revolutions: Mobilization and Change in Contemporary Ukraine III: Archival Records and Historical Sources*. Edited by Paweł Kowal,

Iwona Reichardt and Kateryna Pryshchepa, it includes original historical sources (primarily telegrams and KGB reports) from the time of the Revolution on Granite.

All three volumes were presented to the public during international conferences and academic conventions where they were discussed with scholars and subject specialists.

Since February 2022, with the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the findings of the 3R project have provoked new research questions: Had there been no revolutions in Ukraine, would there have been a war? Had there been no revolutions in Ukraine, would there be a Ukraine at all?

To answer them, the 3R project entered into its second phase, which—because of the new context, both internal in Ukraine and internationally, required a new approach. Thus, this time the 3R research focused on analysing both the resistance of Ukrainian society to the Russian aggression, pointing to the connection between this experience and the earlier revolutions and the international response to Russia's aggression and breaches of international law. Reflecting on the earlier findings, a new research hypothesis was formulated of the long end of the Soviet world. This is observed to have been taking place in Ukraine and it will determine the future of the entire post-Soviet space. In this process, the experience of the three revolutions has and will continue to be of crucial importance.

The final outcomes of the project include the fourth international symposium "Ten Years of Russia's War against Ukraine: The Long End of the Post-Soviet Era", held on 26 March 2024 at the College of Europe campus in Natolin. During this gathering a workshop with direct participants of the events was again organised. Oral history testimonies of foreign diplomats who were in Kyiv at the time of the outbreak of the full-scale war were collected and confronted with expert analyses. These and other findings of the 3R project, are now presented to you in the last volume of the 3R publication series, titled *The End of the Soviet World? Essays on post-communist political and social change.*

As we are completing the project and presenting to you its final publication, we would like to express our special gratitude to the Vice Rector of the College of Europe Natolin Campus, Ewa

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The Editors

Foreword
Reflections on the Long-Lasting Agony of the Soviet World

Georges Mink, Iwona Reichardt

We invite you to read this fourth and final volume of the publication which we have prepared in the framework of the Three Ukrainian Revolutions (3R) two-phased project carried out by the College of Europe in Natolin from 2015 until 2021 and from 2022 until 2024. Titled *The End of the Soviet World: Essays on Post-Communist Social and Political Change*, this collection is an outcome of the second phase of the project. It features academic analyses and essays exploring the transformations that have occurred in the countries that were once a part of the Soviet Union. The authors of the essays examine the ongoing, multifaceted transitions and the continued unravelling of Soviet legacy in modern Ukraine and in the region. However, in the selected chapters they also analyse the efforts to preserve the remnants of the Soviet world, which can be particularly observed in Russia and Belarus.

When in 2022 we started the second phase of the 3R project—"Three Revolutions and the War"—we hoped that with the publication of this book we would be able to announce the end of the Soviet, or even post-Soviet, world. However, as we continued to analyse the changes in the republics, as well as in the Russian Federation, together with the geopolitical shifts taking place in the region since the early 2000s, we concluded that this end may be more adequately called a slow agony. In other words, it is a long lasting process characterised by both complex and changing dynamics. As such, it requires new analytical approaches and a reconsideration of some established concepts. In parallel, as we can see in the analysis of the debate on the new Cold War theory explored by Marek Cichocki in his contribution, the ongoing decomposition of the Soviet reality still points to some features which are rooted in 20th

century experiences and which have not ended with the formal dissolution of the USSR.

Admittedly, despite some desired changes, including the decline of the power of the communist elite, the Soviet legacy has remained a persistent element of the post-Soviet world. Depending on the state, this legacy has taken different forms and demonstrated different levels of intensity and scale. Consequently, while in Ukraine we can now talk about a decisive and conscious departure from anything Soviet, in Russia and Belarus we observe the reverse. Empirical evidence shows either cementing or reintroducing of old Soviet patterns and aesthetics in public spaces. The most extreme example of the latter are the monuments to Stalin which are being erected in today's Russia. In Belarus, the authoritarian system was set in motion almost right after the August 2020 protests. Justyna Olędzka and Kacper Wańczyk in their contribution argue that, despite the earlier hopes, the power system has not disintegrated nor has there been a complete de-legitimisation of Lukashenka's leadership. In other words, Belarus has managed to conserve its authoritarian system.

The tensions that the dynamics between the departure (ex. in Ukraine) vs. conservation (ex. in Russia) of Soviet legacy generate should neither be neglected nor underestimated. This is especially true when one of the parties involved in this dispute is the Russian Federation (former centre of the empire). In the most extreme case, as we can see in Ukraine, historical argumentation over shared legacy can be used in the rhetoric that is meant to justify a war.

The question thus remains: when will the Soviet world and its legacy finally come to an end? How long do we need to wait for this agony to be completed? As social scientists we avoid predictions about the future, but we can always draw some valuable conclusions from the past.

History thus shows that the Soviet system has already been painfully, although not fatally, injured for a few times. These injuries were the result of the work and determination of large social and political movements formed in different socialist states in the second half of the 20th century: in 1956 in Hungary, in 1968 in

Czechoslovakia, and in 1980-1981 in Poland. Yet, more than anything else, the changes that took place in 1989 across Central Europe and in 1991 on the territory of the former USSR marked the beginning of the long-lasting Soviet agony. This process, which was significantly different than the transformation in Central Europe and the Baltic states, took a special form in the former Soviet republics. Faced with numerous existential problems that came with the rapid transformation from a command economy to an uncontrolled free market, but also the collapse of an empire, these countries have in fact built what we now call the "post-Soviet world". The end of this geopolitical entity has also been announced already on at least a few occasions. In the first phase of our project we analysed the three Ukrainian revolutions (the 1990 Granite Revolution, the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2013-2014 Revolution of Dignity) which catalysed the departure from the post-Soviet reality in Ukraine. The decision of the Ukrainian society to protest Viktor Yanukovych's decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union can thus be interpreted as its determination to continue a path to liberate Ukraine from Moscow's control. In other words, it is a geopolitical choice, with all of its consequences.

Thus, to fully understand the agony of the Soviet world, we need to take into account not only all of the elements of the Soviet system but also recognise that what we are witnessing today is a global reshuffling of geopolitical cards. The strength of some actors, such as the United States and Western Europe, seem to be permanently tested, from inside and outside, while others (Russia and China especially) seem to have used the opportunity to advance their positions, even when it means breaching of international laws. The latter two countries have also taken advantage of the many crises in the West as well as some of its mistakes, especially when it comes to policies towards Eastern Europe (consider German *Ostpolitik* since 2014). Observing these new dynamics, we can thus say that when Vladimir Putin first called the collapse of the Soviet Union the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century he, albeit indirectly, announced the completion of the Soviet period and proclaimed a return to the tradition of the eternal Russian empire.

For the reasons explained above, we propose a distinction between what we call *post-Soviet geopolitics*, which points to the role that Russia (now also backed by China and in co-operation with North Korea) has played in international affairs since the end of the Cold War from the *anthropological approach to Soviet legacy* which is expressed through the concepts of *Homo Sovieticus* and *Homo Post-Sovieticus*. Admittedly, these two categories, despite their name, do not allow us to depict region-specific transformations, which are necessary for the analysis of the Soviet decline. This limitation can be explained by a wide range of sociological research which shows that reactions similar to those assigned to *Homo Sovieticus* especially but also to *Homo Post-Sovieticus,* although to a smaller degree, are not necessarily limited to people who experienced Soviet authoritarianism or post-Soviet transformation. They are also observed in other non-democratic systems (from totalitarian to authoritarian). The opposite yet can be said about the geopolitical changes, which we are seeing now in some of the post-Soviet republics, and which clearly point to the process of the decomposition (accelerated in some cases, slower in others) of the Soviet world. The case of Ukraine, which we deeply researched in the first phase of the 3R project, serves here as the best example.

The argumentation presented above is not meant to suggest that the anthropological approach should be discredited, or entirely abandoned. Its framework allows us to notice, which Kinga Anna Gajda explores in the chapter on Westernisation vs. Easternisation, that the stimulus for the decline of what we call *Homo Sovieticus* or *Homo Post-Sovieticus* is the attraction of the Western model of modernity. This model is said to assign the highest value to two systems: liberal democracy and free market economy. However, the rapid pace of Westernisation, meaning an adoption of these two systems in a country which did not have them in place before, can also be painful and bring on some negative social consequences. We have seen this in Central Europe where rapid economic transformation contributed to vast inequalities, which, in turn, have created a fertile ground for discontent and populism. The consequences of this "imitation" of the ultra-liberal model have been well analysed

by Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes in their book *The Light that Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy.*[1]

Similar tendencies have been recorded in the former Soviet republics, including the Russian Federation. In this region, however, the adoption of the Western model faces additional challenges: corruption and oligarchisation. The academic literature has long discussed the capture of control over strategic resources and its detrimental impact, particularly on democratic institutions. Today, especially in Russia, power is wielded by those who control energy and mineral resources, as well as by those with authority over the nation's nuclear arsenal.

Homo Sovieticus and Homo Post-Sovieticus

The concept of *Homo Sovieticus*, which describes a set of traits characteristic of a specific personality type, was popularised by the Soviet dissident writer and philosopher Alexander Zinoviev. Yet, as previously mentioned, the universality of these traits presents a limitation to this analytical category. Their presence across various political and social systems indicates that psychological responses to life under authoritarian regimes are similar, regardless of geography or historical period. This is why an observation made by Polish poet Antoni Słonimski, who traveled to Soviet Russia in 1932, continues to be relevant today—not only in regards to contemporary Russia but towards other contexts as well. Słonimski wrote: "*Russians live in fear of their own authorities. Despite the threat of the war, which is less strong on Russia's vast territory (...) than in crowded European cities, Russians live in a permanent state of alert. They are a bit like soldiers who live in trenches outside the frontline and who do not know what will the night bring for them nor whether it will take them to the first positions. (...) Every carelessly stated opinion can be the cause for an investigation.*"[2]

One of the defining traits of *Homo Sovieticus* is a strong dependence on the state. In the Soviet system, the state controlled

1 Holmes, S., Krastev, I., 2020, *The Light That Failed: Why the West Is Losing the Fight for Democracy*, New York: Pegasus Books.

2 Słonimski, A., 2007, *Moja podróż do Rosji (w 1932 roku),* Łomianki: LTW, p. 111.

nearly every aspect of life, including education and health. This pervasive control fostered a sense of submissiveness and reliance, enabling individuals to shift personal responsibilities onto state decisions. Such systems promote conformity, pressuring people to conceal actions or beliefs that could result in punishment. Sociological research into axiological systems of the people living in the Soviet world thus pointed to such defence mechanisms as being double-faced and showing certain schizophrenia in expressing opinions. In other words, while in public people were repeating the official versions and interpretations of reality, they often criticised them in private.

Homo Sovieticus did not disappear with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. On the contrary, as a model of human behaviour it remained in many post-Soviet republics for a long time. The books by Svetlana Alexievich, Belarusian writer and Nobel Prize recipient in Literature, explore this topic from a micro perspective, bringing valuable insights into the experience of vast social groups. Her writings also show that people's mentality and habits, which resulted from decades of life in an authoritarian system, have survived the change of the political system. This was true especially for the representatives of the older generation. Numerous studies show that this group remains highly susceptible to Kremlin propaganda, even when living in the independent republics. The same applies to Soviet nostalgia, as idealizing the past has become a coping mechanism for many people facing the difficulties of post-Soviet life.

The term *Homo Post-Sovieticus* has often been used as a reference to people who struggle when adapting to the new political and economic systems. Frequently disappointed with the unfulfilled promises, these people have often had no choice but to survive in the often brutal capitalist world. To do so, some of them use familiar behaviour patterns which they have inherited from Soviet times. These include a high degree of cynicism towards the institution of the state and the lack of trust in official narratives and ideology. The popularity of non-institutional and non-official practices and projects which we have seen among post-Soviet societies since the be-

ginning of the transformation are a perfect illustration of these psychological experiences in which a state or an institution is perceived as the enemy of a human being.

A discourse analysis of Putin's system points to two pillars of power: a recreation of the empire and military aggression. These two features are what today's Russia has in common with the Soviet Union. In addition, the ideological foundation of Putin's power derives from Russian/Orthodox imperialism, Russian/Orthodox conservatism, pan-Slavism and Eurasianism. Putin takes advantage of this ideological mishmash because the collective memory of the Russian people, which was formed in the Soviet system to be later only reinforced by the propaganda tubes during his own rule, allows him to do so. The education process of Soviet citizens included military trainings, while their lives were spent in numerous military and patriotic associations. The calendars of the Soviet people were filled with military holidays, while commemorations of the sacrifice of those who fought in the Great Patriotic War were perceived as a civic duty. That is why, Georges Mink in his chapter on the strategic phantasmagoria, points to a certain militarisation of collective memory in today's Russia.

Geopolitics and the promise of departure from the post-Soviet system

Taking into account the above we can formulate a hypothesis that the collapse of the Soviet world is dependent on the geopolitical situation. In strictly geopolitical terms, the end of the Soviet, or post-Soviet, world reflects radical transformation in international dynamics which prevailed in the post-Soviet republics after the collapse of the USSR. Namely, after decades of Russia's attempts to maintain control over the former republics, the events which have taken place in recent years may indicate the end of the period of Russian-led rebuilding of the empire. Instead a new path towards re-organisation of alliances and spheres of influence has been undertaken by the former republics. In Kataryna Wolczuk's and Wojciech Michnik's contributions, this topic is discussed in regards to Ukraine's integration with both the EU and NATO. These two

processes, although far from completed, are now determining this country's development path and lead it towards the final abandonment of the Soviet world.

Despite the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 the Russian Federation has tried to maintain its influence over the former Soviet republics by establishing numerous alliances: economic, military or political. These attempts got circumvented in recent decades when the so-called "coloured revolutions" erupted throughout the former Soviet republics. Highly anti-Soviet, but also anti-Russian, these protest actions proved troublesome to the Russian authorities. The Kremlin has correctly recognised them as fatal blows to the post-Soviet world and started reorganising its own policies and decisions to counteract them. These conclusions were reached by our research team when we worked on the first phase of the 3R project. In our academic investigation we have used a whole series of enquiry methods, starting with historical workshops in which we confronted history witnesses and most important revolutionaries to hundreds of interviews which we conducted with the oral history method with participants of numerous revolutionary actors. The analysis which we carried out on this material allowed us to confirm our hypothesis and recognise the three Ukrainian revolutions as turning points in the process of building modern Ukraine.

In the second phase of the project, when we focused on the three revolutions and the war, we expand this hypothesis to argue that these revolutions should be also treated as milestones in the process of Ukraine's de-Sovietisation and correlate with the consolidation of national identity of the Ukrainian society and its sense of belonging to the European civilisational community. This analysis has, to some extent, attempted to answer the question asked at a 3R symposium in December 2022 by Ukraine's former Ambassador to Poland — Andrii Deshchytsia. As a former revolutionary taking part in all three Ukrainian revolutions but also as a member of Ukrainian government and its representative abroad Deshchytsia then asked: "Would there be a war, had there been no revolutions?" Andrew Wilson, while analysing the role of political technology in Ukraine and how it was used at the moments of protest, such as the Maidans, argues in his contribution that a true departure from the

Soviet world, in Ukraine's case, means that "there will be no more Maidans. Just normal protests; not existential struggles against a 'regime'".

While preparing this publication, we confirmed that Russia's decision to regain control over Ukraine, by means of a full-scale invasion in this country, was caused by Ukraine's confirmations of its true independence. Russia's desire to take over Ukraine through a full-scale invasion has led to a situation where the latter has now cut itself completely off from any relations with Moscow. The only interstate interactions that are now in place are those between their fighting armies. While the decisions made by the Ukrainian authorities point to advancement of the decolonisation process, the policies that the Russian Federation has been carrying out towards native Ukrainians in the four regions that are currently under its occupation resemble 19th century colonialism. Kidnapping of children and their forced Russification, Russification of education and rewriting of school textbooks, passportisation, as well as open repressions of grassroots national movements clearly resemble the colonial brutality of previous periods, just implemented with modern means of "persuasion". This topic is explored by Magdalena Lachowicz in her chapter on Russia's policies towards the Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics". The topic of decolonisation of Eastern Europe is, in turn, analysed by Anton Saifullayeu. However, the postulate for greater inclusion of decolonisation theory into studies of post-Soviet transformation is also formulated by Iwona Reichardt in the chapter on the unfinished transformation in Russia and Belarus.

As a result of Russia's war, which in Ukraine started in 2014, the Ukrainian nation, which in its centuries' long history underwent different phases of development, became truly consolidated and—as a European nation—decided to opt for the EU and NATO path. This decision was not accepted by the Kremlin from the very beginning. We could observe Moscow's reactions in 2013, when it forced President Viktor Yanukovych not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU; and we could see it in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and started military operations in eastern parts of

Ukraine. Finally, we could see it in 2022 when the Russian Federation launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As a result of all these activities initiated by Russia against Ukraine, this country once central for Russia's sphere of influence, has now turned into a battlefield, where the fate of the old Soviet order is being fought over. Although fought on Ukraine's territory, this war is not only to decide about the future of Ukraine. Its outcome will surely have an effect on the condition of the region, but also Europe as a whole.

In the article "La longue guerre d'Ukraine" ("The Long War in Ukraine"), published in December 2022 in the French journal *Le Grand Continent*, which specialises in geopolitics, a renowned French diplomat Jean-Marie Guéhenno argues that the decline of the Soviet Union has benefited European integration. He writes: "What does the war in Ukraine mean for Europe? On the face of it, it is accelerating a geopolitical awakening among Europeans, who—Germany included—are increasing their military budgets and managing to overcome their differences by voting for and then renewing an imposing package of sanctions against Russia and adopting measures to help Ukraine, mainly in the humanitarian field. A powerful wave of solidarity seems to have swept across Europe, where millions of Ukrainian refugees have been generously welcomed. The images of devastated Ukrainian cities and the faces of Ukrainians fleeing the bombs hold up a mirror to the citizens of Europe, lulled to sleep by decades of peace, which suddenly throws them into a world of war and destruction. Ukrainian cities and Ukrainian faces have the familiarity of old Europe, but the world of devastation and terror that they express is not the world to which Europeans have been accustomed for three quarters of a century of peace—with the exception of the war in Yugoslavia. This discrepancy is provoking a radical shock. Will this shock accelerate the political transformation of the European Union and bind it together in the face of a Russian adversary whose brutality and contempt for the law are the antithesis of the values on which Europe claims to be built? Is a European political identity emerging in the face of

Russia? Will Russia give rise to the kind of European patriotism that the terrorist attacks of the past few years have shown?”[3]

The world famous chess master and Russian oppositionist, Garry Kasparov, makes a poignant statement about the gravity of the situation and the significance of this war. In his chapter, Kasparov states that: “NATO was established in 1949 to save Europe from a Russian invasion. At that time, the threat was to be found east of the Rhine river. Today, it can be found east of the Dnieper river, but it's the same threat. Ukraine is the only country that has spilled its blood fulfilling NATO's purpose.”

The war in Ukraine is yet only the beginning of the decline of Russia’s influences in the post-Soviet space. Geopolitical changes have also been taking place in Central Asia. Experts on this region clearly suggests that its countries, traditionally under strong Russian influence, are now undergoing a strong re-orientation, turning towards China. Beijing has also been significantly investing in this region, especially through the New Silk Road project. Its beneficiaries include Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan which in parallel to establishing partnerships with China are now also testing other directions in their foreign policy choices. Namely, they are showing their openness to co-operation with Turkey but also the European Union.

Other non-Central Asian, post-Soviet republics have also been openly stating their preferences for Western integration. In addition to Ukraine, this group also includes Moldova, and to some degree also Georgia. Despite some challenges, including internal politics, both states have in recent years strengthened their official integration with the West in general, and the European Union in particular. While in the case of Georgia the steady pro-European path is now more of the unknown, given the results of its 2024 parliamentary elections, in the case of Moldova, there is more reason for cautious optimism. In both cases, however, we are dealing with countries whose societies are divided between those that are pro-West-

3 Guéhenno, J-M., 2022, “La longue guerre d’Ukraine”, *Le Grand Continent*. https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2022/12/12/la-longue-guerre-dukraine/.

ern and those that remain under Russia's influence. The weak economic situation in both of these states makes them particularly vulnerable to Kremlin interference and manipulation. Evidence shows that to halt the pro-European direction in both of these states Russia uses a plethora of methods, ranging from bribes and cyberattacks to all kinds of provocations.

All in all, the war in Ukraine, which started in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and took the form of the full-scale invasion in 2022, can be treated as a turning point in the process of the final agony of the post-Soviet world. It can be explained by the following factors.

First, as a result of the war, Russia's role as a protective superpower is no longer justified. By attempting to reassert control over Ukraine, Russia has triggered the opposite effect, undermining its traditional role, at least in the view of some states and organisations, as a security guarantor in the post-Soviet space. Second, as mentioned earlier, the conflict unfolding on the battlefield in Ukraine is not only about Ukraine itself. Several post-Soviet republics with histories of Russian dominance are now reassessing their relations with the Kremlin. These include Moldova, Kazakhstan, and, to some extent, Georgia and Belarus. Third, the war in Ukraine has revealed the growing distance some Central Asian and South Caucasus countries are placing between themselves and Russia. Kazakhstan, in particular, has been vocal, refusing to recognise Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories. Fourth, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has intensified its diplomatic isolation, evident through international sanctions and the deterioration of relations with Western nations. In contrast, Ukraine's ties with NATO states have only strengthened, prompting Russia to seek military alliances with non-Western countries. Today, Russia's allies include Iran as well as North Korea, whose soldiers are now fighting alongside Russian forces in the war against Ukraine. These developments support the hypothesis of an ongoing fragmentation of the post-Soviet space, producing surprising outcomes beyond the region.

The post-Soviet era was marked by efforts to maintain cohesion among former Soviet republics under the influence of the Rus-

sian Federation. This was intended to be achieved through organisations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, this cohesion has significantly weakened as a result of the war in Ukraine. First, the Commonwealth of Independent States, established after the dissolution of the USSR, has largely lost its relevance and purpose. Several member states, such as Ukraine and Georgia, have either withdrawn completely or limited their participation, while others, particularly in Central Asia, are gradually distancing themselves from this organisation. The Eurasian Economic Union, initiated by Moscow as a counterweight to the European Union, has struggled to have a meaningful impact on the regional economy. Moreover, internal tensions, especially between Kazakhstan and Russia, are further undermining its effectiveness. Similarly, BRICS, intended as a rival to Western economic alliances, remains far from achieving its objectives.

A discussion on the geopolitical changes in the post-Soviet space should not ignore the changes that have taken place in parallel in the West and which have an effect also on this region, especially in the wartime reality. Some countries, such as Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states, have become frontline states, which makes them at high risk of the next stage of invasion, while others that were previously neutral, such as Finland and Sweden, have joined NATO, further isolating Russia from the Western world. All of these nations have significantly increased their military budgets as well as efforts aimed at countering Russian influence. They have also all been reporting acts of sabotage on their territories which includes interference in GPS systems, arsons, and cyber-attacks, including disruptions in banking systems.

In geopolitical terms, the incomplete end of the Soviet era has already led to a decline in Russian influence over the former Soviet republics and a redefinition of Russia's spheres of influence. The Russian Federation, which has long acted as a regional hegemon, has now lost its absolute power. It faces growing pressure from other significant players, such as China, Turkey, and the European

Union. In this context, the war in Ukraine represents a pivotal moment that has accelerated the fragmentation of the post-Soviet order and reinforced the tendency of neighbouring states to distance themselves from Moscow. This marks the end of an era in which Russia could present itself as the unquestioned centre of the Sovietised region. Ukraine's role in this process is unquestionable.

Russia's imperial traditions

From today's perspective, both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods appear as relatively brief chapters in Russia's long imperial history. Putin's Russia reveals a clear ambition to revive imperial aspirations, reminiscent in some ways of pre-Soviet Russia, particularly the final phase and legacy of the Russian Empire. As a result, the idea of Russia's deep and enduring authoritarian roots is compelling, especially in light of discussions surrounding the potential rapid collapse and fragmentation of the Russian Federation. This vision of Russia's future is sometimes expressed in both media and academic discourse. However, their validation remains distant, as there are currently too few indicators to suggest an imminent breakup of the federation.

Instead, what we see is a form of enduring imperial authoritarianism evident in many of Putin's speeches, military activities and Russia's broader geopolitical strategy. Under Putin, there has been a clear revival of the Russian Empire's legacy and a valorisation of tsarist periods as historical models. He frequently references figures such as Peter the Great, who expanded Russia's territory through conquest, and Catherine the Great, who solidified its imperial power. Putin often emphasises Russia's historical role as a great power, framing it as a continuing duty to protect and extend influence over "historic lands".

The concept of *Russkiy mir* (*Russian World*) serves as a modern extension of the idea of a cultural and spiritual space that Russia must defend and promote. This notion extends beyond Russia's current borders to encompass territories where imperial or Soviet Russia once held power, including Ukraine, Belarus, and other former Soviet republics, which the Kremlin perceives as integral parts

of Russia's sphere of influence. In the post-Soviet era, Russia has cultivated a form of nationalism, which combines tsarist imperial grandeur with conservative values endorsed by the Orthodox Church. This church-state alliance reinforces the notion of an imperial "civilizing mission," a central theme of the former Russian Empire.

The war in Ukraine serves as evidence of Russia's revived imperial ambitions. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022 should thus be treated as the continuation of the territorial expansion strategies employed by the Russian Empire, where geographic conquest was a key means of consolidating state power. Russia views Crimea not only as a strategically important peninsula which enables a strategic position on the Black Sea but also as a crucial part of its imperial heritage, having been annexed by the Russian Empire under Catherine the Great in 1783. Putin frames the re-acquisition of Crimea as a restoration of the natural order, correcting what he considers a historical mistake: the transfer of Crimea to Soviet Ukraine in 1954.

Putin has also justified the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by referencing Russia's imperial history, claiming that modern Ukraine owes its existence to the errors made by Soviet leaders, particularly Lenin. He depicts Kyiv as the "mother of all Russian cities", positioning it as an essential part of Russia's historical heartland. However, Russia's imperialist ambitions under Putin extend beyond Ukraine.

Russian interventions throughout the post-Soviet and broader Eurasian regions reveal a persistent desire to re-establish hegemonic influence. Russia has been asserting itself as the dominant power in the Caucasus, evident in its support for Armenia and its ambiguous role in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. In Georgia, Russia has employed a similar strategy, seizing entire regions in 2008 and bringing South Ossetia and Abkhazia under its control. Here, Russia presents itself as both an arbiter and a superpower intent on preserving its imperial influence over the republics of the Caucasus—a region the Russian Empire gradually annexed in the 19th century. In Central Asia, Russia

seeks to position itself as a guarantor of security and stability, echoing its imperial policies of expansion in the region under the tsars. Despite China's growing influence in this region, Russia continues to assert its presence through military means (via the Collective Security Treaty Organization) and economic mechanisms (such as the Eurasian Economic Union).

Finally, we need to take into account the ideological shift driven by Putin and his advisors, who have turned Soviet "imperialism" into an expansionist nationalism. The Soviet Union, an imperial superpower in its own right, was characterised by the so-called Marxist proletarian international solidarity (internationalism) which meant using military conquests to promote communist ideology. Fuelled by this ideology, the Red Army sought to ignite a global revolution shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution. Its first major offensive, in 1920-1921, targeted Poland as a gateway to Western Europe, where revolutionary fervour was already spreading (notably in Bavaria and Budapest). This effort reflected Karl Marx's vision of a proletarian revolution in the developed capitalist states. Today, Russia's approach is markedly different. The Kremlin no longer seeks to export a universal ideology. Instead, Putin focuses on promoting a nationalist vision centred on Russian historical greatness. This vision emphasises the defence of "Russian civilisation" and the consolidation of territories viewed as historically Russian.

Unlike the Soviet Union which was trying to support communist movements worldwide, Putin's Russia concentrates its efforts on its near neighbours which it does by defending their Russian-speaking populations. This strategy seems closer to tsarist imperialism which also aimed more at protecting Orthodox and Russian minorities in areas that were under foreign domination than at a global expansion of the tsarist system. This does not mean that Russia limits its operations and is not active in the broader world. It remains engaged, especially economically, but not only, on the African continent where it uses private militia forces to extract natural resources.

The mechanisms of the authoritarian power, concentrated in Putin's and his elite's hands, are a mirror reflection of the imperial

post-Soviet model. In this model, there is strong oligarchy which allows for a smooth transfer of goods and capital between the Russian president and the privileged political and military elite. The centralisation of power around a strong leader, application of repressions in order to maintain order and promotion of conservative nationalism are all elements that could be found in the tsarist system. Even the model of repressions against political opponents and strict control over media resembles practices of the Russian empire where tsars were using the secret police and censorship to silence any discontent. Murders by poisoning, infiltration of opposition groups abroad, diplomatic provocations all resemble the tsarist system of Okhrana, which was the popular name for the Department for the Protection of Public Safety and Order, but in today's context and with today's tools. Such authoritarian control allows Putin to rule by strengthening the idea of a strong Russia which, nonetheless is constantly threatened from within and abroad.

Disintegration of the Russian Federation?

Returning to the question as how far away we are from the end of the post-Soviet world, or—as some authors propose—the collapse of the Russian Federation; admittedly, while we may see many experts pose such a question, we also notice that the final answers are no to be obtained yet. For example, Paweł Kowal, one of the main researchers and the co-leader in the 3R project, in his well-known theory of the Five Rings of the Empire states the following:

> "The process of rebuilding the Russian imperial rings of influence may appear to some as a simple construction of a 'strong Russia'. Yet, the idea to build the Third Empire is not grounded in a sustainable economy or sound social policies. Moreover, the radical policies of the Kremlin today are not solely due to authorities trying to maintain power, but are to a large degree—and paradoxically—a symptom that the process of Russia's de-imperialisation has entered a decisive new phase."

In a similar vein, French specialist in Soviet and post-Soviet economics Georges Sokolof titled his extensive economic analysis of the post-Soviet Russia *La Puissance pauvre* (*The Poor Power*). Numerous think tanks focused on the developments in the region estimate

that Russia has enough resources to wage war in Ukraine only until the end of 2024, which would prove Putin's weakness. However, such scenarios for the near future are purely probabilistic. Thus numerous speculations are built around the predictions of potential fracturing of the Russian Federation, ranging from minor fractures to definitive fragmentation and radical disintegration of the state.

At the moment this is only a dream. One which may be visualised, as it was attempted by Alexander Etkind his recent book *Russia Against Modernity,* but still a dream. Yet in order to take a break from the worrisome reality we came to witness in recent years, let us allow ourselves to dream, at least for a short moment, and read the vision of the future that Etkind offers: "The Federation's dismemberment threw up an enormous number of legal, strategic and economic questions. Settling borders, rebuilding trade and negotiating security arrangements took decades. Dealing with the legacy of the heinous war and creating new statehoods did not happen immediately. But the peoples of the former Federation learned how to make their own way. History continued, and the international community took note of the changes. A peace conference was held, modelled after the Paris Peace Conference of 1918-19. A new Eurasian Treaty completed the work begun at Versailles a century earlier. From Ukraine to Mongolia, the neighbours of the new countries mediated."[4] As we were finalizing the editorial work on this volume we were also observing the final stage of Donald Trump's campaign in America and his victory. As observers of political changes we ask ourselves: what will this choice of the American society bring to our region? One of the most pessimistic hypotheses is that a part of sovereign Ukraine will become a demilitarised zone, in line with the Korean model. An even worse model would be that of Transnistria, which is a breakaway territory under Russia's control. Such a development would significantly prolong the process of the empire's collapse, spreading pessimism in the post-Soviet republics and among its very many ethnic minorities that have chosen the path of escaping from the unwanted "guardian". To use the words of another American, this time writer, Mark

4 Etkind, A. ,2023, *Russia against modernity*, Cambridge, UK: Polity, p.143.