



Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie:
Diritto, Istituzioni, Società

The End of a Great Era: Post-Soviet Transformation in a Historical Perspective

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Abstract

This article offers a conceptual and methodological apparatus for assessing periods of contemporary history. Using this apparatus and empirical data from the development of Eastern European and northern Eurasian countries over the last forty years, the article analyzes the establishment, evolution, and decline of the post-Soviet period. These developmental processes are conceptualized in terms of five categories: democratization, autocratization, marketization, nationalization, and Europeanization. The article concludes that the post-Soviet period and its structural processes have ended, and Europe and Eurasia must undergo the process of remapping their geography and adjusting their regional temporalities.

Keywords: Eastern Europe – Post-Soviet Transformation – Democratization – Autocratization – Europeanization.

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1. Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union created a long-term impetus for the development of Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia. The influence of this impetus can be traced along four lines – political, economic, social, and transnational – that, following the language of active participants in these processes in the early 1990s¹, can be named democratization, marketization, nationalization, and Europeanization. Altogether, these four areas of development constituted the post-Soviet transformational tetrad², a model which one can use to describe the post-communist transformation in this region and timeframe.

Behind the model, however, the post-Soviet social reality extended far beyond these four lines. Despite the common impulse, the dynamics of change varied significantly in each domain. Nonetheless, they shared a common destiny: the initial impetus gradually faded away as the gravity of other political entities began to determine the processes of the region. Democratization gave way to autocratization; marketization struggled with corruption; nationalization oscillated between its civic and ethnic poles, as well as between anarchy and *étatisme*; and Europeanization vacillated between the integratory processes of the Council of Europe (CoE), the European Union, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and conflict with the Eurasian Economic Union and Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Thus, the post-Soviet period – and all historical, sociopolitical, and cultural phenomena connected to it – slowly approached its end.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was a historical milestone that marked the end of the post-Soviet period. The invasion demonstrated that the post-Soviet impulse and its model no longer define the life of people in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia³. New timeframes and regional units are emerging in that part of the world and our segment of global history. Therefore, it is time to recognize the post-Soviet period as part of the past by looking back and making our first historical evaluations of the path that the Eastern European and Northern Eurasian peoples have traveled over the last three decades.

¹ For an analysis of the evolution of scholars' approaches to studying the socioeconomic transformation of Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia, see M. Minakov, *The Transition of "Transition": Assessing the Post-Communist Experience and Its Research*, in O. Kushnir, O. Pankieiev (Eds.), *Meandering in Transition: Thirty Years of Identity Building in Post-Communist Europe*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2021, 25-41.

² Here I unite the terms "post-communist" and "post-Soviet" to designate the socio-political transformation of the people living in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia in 1989-2022 that stemmed from the denial of the Soviet social imagination, the Soviet interpretation of Marxism, and the Soviet power practices that controlled social realities in the Soviet republics (1922-1991) and the members of the Eastern Bloc (1947-1989).

³ If the assumption that the post-Soviet period has ended is true, it is no longer correct to call the fifteen recognized and four non-recognized states that were established after the fall of the USSR "post-Soviet". For that reason, the term "Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia" is used to denote the group constituted by these states. This region includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, as well as Abkhazia, Nagorno Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria.

Therefore, in this paper, I will address the following questions: What features defined the post-Soviet period? When did it begin and end, and what were the dialectics of its development? Finally, it will be important to consider the possible implications of the end of this period and the consequent dissolution of the post-Soviet region.

The answers to these questions dictate the structure of this paper. First, I define the major concepts and methodological approach to addressing these questions. Second, I offer a macro-level analysis of the post-Soviet transformational tetrad's tendencies. Then, I suggest answers and conclusions. Finally, the conclusion advances some preliminary remarks on the possible tendencies of "post-post-Soviet" development.

2. Concepts and Methodology

Before answering the key questions of this paper, we must first come to terms with what makes a historical period and defines its beginning and end. In addition, we must define the key concepts used in this paper: democratization, autocratization, marketization, nationalization, and Europeanization.

2.1. History as a Dynamic Unity of Continuities and Caesuras

For the purposes of this research and in continuation of the discussion around Reinhart Koselleck's idea of multiple temporalities⁴, I propose that history should be considered a combination of continuities and caesuras that refers simultaneously – in the social reality and in our imagination – to the past, the now, and the future of humankind, each community, and each person. The continuities refer to collective efforts to live through periods in certain regions with traces of an individual and collective co-presence in historical events. The caesuras are moments of rupture, which are experienced as social, political, or ecological crises – that is, moments that put an end to events and their specific orders and open a space for new ones. Continuity is thus the historical element that gives human creativity a place and time to be realized, while the caesura is the historical element in which one continuity is fully or partially halted and a new continuity can begin. During a caesura, a historical actor (a big or small group organized around some historical identity) meets with the nothingness that pervades the human world and

⁴ See R. Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, Stanford University Press, 2002. For the discussion around the topic, see: N. Olsen, *Carl Schmitt, Reinhart Koselleck and the Foundations of History and Politics*, in *History of European Ideas*, No. 2, 2011; D. Blackbourn, "The Horologe of Time": *Periodization in History*, in *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, No. 2, 2012; L. Besserman, *The Challenge of Periodization: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, in L. Besserman (Ed.), *The Challenge of Periodization: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, Routledge, 2014, 3-12; C. Lorenz, "The Times They Are a-Changin". *On Time, Space and Periodization in History*, in M. Carretero, S. Berger, M. Grever (Eds.), *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*, Palgrave, 2017, 109-131.

decides to forge a new self-understanding, self-definition, and project, projecting a sketch into the void of the future. Consequently, history is a constellation of events and narrations – as well as their disruptions – where different historical actors constantly end and restart some projects and tell and retell their (hi)stories.

Caesuras occur as vital changes, such as those that transformed one geological period into another, fundamentally altering the forms of life on Earth. Caesuras can also be seen in wars or revolutions leading to changes in social orders and relevant imaginations. Furthermore, it is important to remember that there can be attempts at caesuras, or hybrid events, when the rupture of some historical process does not create a lasting change. In these cases, the energy of the continuity is stronger than the energy of the caesura, and the continuity is reinstated after the attempt at a caesura fails.

An example of a caesura is the period from 1989 to 1991 when the Eastern Bloc and the USSR collapsed. For the individuals and communities living between the Adriatic and White Seas, from the Alps to the Kamchatka, these few years were an opportunity to re-evaluate their recent histories, reject their political systems stemming from the Soviet communist imagination, and – most importantly – launch their new collective socio-political projects and shape the new historical time and space.

2.2. The Caesura of 1989-1991 and the Beginning of the Post-Soviet Period

The post-Soviet period began with the caesura of 1989 to 1991 when the communist order's continuity was ruptured⁵. Spatially, the post-Soviet period concerns the societies and communities that were formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union; temporally, it refers to approximately thirty years between the 1989-1991 caesura and the new caesura that began with the event of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In terms of historical meaning, the post-Soviet period unleashed human creativity in the realms of political, civil, religious, entrepreneurial, and ethnonational emancipation. This creativity also brought the Western experience to the people of Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia, who partially changed their social realities in accord with the imported models. For the people living in the Eastern Bloc and the USSR, the caesura of 1989-1991 was a revolutionary moment that created opportunities to build functional democracies, open market economies, new nation-states, and Europe-inspired societies.

⁵ There is consensus on this origin point among contemporary historians and political scholars. For example, see arguments in: V. Solonari, *Creating a "People": A Case Study in Post-Soviet History-Writing*, in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, No. 2, 2003; J. Asanova, *Teaching the Canon? Nation-Building and Post-Soviet Kazakhstan's Literature Textbooks*, in *Compare*, No. 3, 2007; R. Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2006*, Peter Lang, 2007; T. Sherlock, *Historical Narratives in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia: Destroying the Settled Past, Creating an Uncertain Future*, Springer, 2007; M. Minakov, G. Kasianov, M. Rojansky (Eds.), *From "The Ukraine" to Ukraine: A Contemporary History, 1991-2021*, Ibidem Press, 2021.

With this in mind, post-Soviet means anti-Soviet. In other words, the post-Soviet era began with two guiding ideas: (1) overcoming the traumas committed by the Soviet communist regime and preserved in the social imagination and cultural practices, and (2) finding ways into the future based on human creativity and largely determined by the goal of negating the Soviet past. Historical events and self-descriptive narratives of that period were diverse but largely linked to the doomed (Soviet) past, which inhibited the social imagination and repressed human creativity. Thus, the four major lines of the post-Soviet transformation – democratization, marketization, nationalization, and Europeanization – were understood and practiced by traumatized individuals and collectives, with their Soviet- and caesura-related concerns and sufferings.

However, as the developments and narratives of the post-Soviet era demonstrated, the caesura of 1989-1991 reached different depths and created various breaks with Soviet continuity in each post-Soviet society. These differences will be discussed below.

2.3. Key Concepts

The following analysis depends on five concepts that require definition and contextualization regarding the post-Soviet period: democratization, autocratization, marketization, nationalization, and Europeanization.

Democratization relates to the many political and social processes in the post-Soviet societies that focused on constructing new political cultures, systems, and regimes founded on the division of power between autonomous branches, as well as among central and local governments; the rule of law and human rights; ideological pluralism; the diversity of parties and competitive elections; the strong role of independent mass media and civic organizations; and the growing role of citizens in decision-making processes⁶. Although the post-Soviet spread of democracy was part of a wider global process (the third wave of democratization), it had some specific characteristics, as post-Soviet nations reinvented political freedom and institutions in the early 1990s without the first-hand experience of such liberties and under the strong influence of Western political models and social imagination. Nonetheless, arguably all post-Soviet nations experienced political freedom and participation to some extent; some, like Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, only briefly experienced such freedom, while others, like Belarus and Russia, had a much longer attempt at freedom with a bitter termination. For some, such as those who live in the Baltic countries or Moldova, the experience of freedom continues.

Autocratization is a term applied not only to the decline of democracy in post-Soviet societies but also to the long-term tendency toward autocratic

⁶ See: J. Dryzek, L. Holmes, *Post-Communist Democratization: Political Discourses across Thirteen Countries*, Cambridge University Press, 2002; V. Gel'man, *Post-Soviet Transitions and Democratization: Towards Theory-Building*, in *Democratization*, No. 2, 2003; S. Gunitsky, *Democratic Waves in Historical Perspective*, in *Perspectives on Politics*, No. 3, 218.

institutionalization and social acceptance. In other words, autocratization is an overarching concept that includes gradual democratic recession, sudden breakdowns of democracy, and autocratic consolidation «resulting in less democratic, or more autocratic, situations»⁷. The third wave of autocratization is an ongoing global political process that began around 2008-2012 when the number of countries simultaneously witnessing the decline of democracy and the growth of effective autocratic political systems and corresponding ideologies dramatically increased⁸. At that time, the national and international conflicts that had been growing in the post-Soviet region since 2003 sharpened under the influence of wider autocratization and led to the launch of massive military conflicts in the east of Europe in 2014 and 2022.

Marketization refers to the process of establishing new economies oriented to the neoliberal market model and participation in the global economy. In the post-Soviet period, economic transformation was expected to occur through the privatization of huge socialist economic legacies, the creation of an entrepreneurial class, and the formation of a “middle class” of economically self-sufficient citizens who would not be willing to depend on the government and would demand the respect of their political liberties. The new social structure with new classes was expected to prevent communists from returning to power and provide the relevant economic background and social structure for democratization⁹.

In this context, nationalization refers to the process of creating new post-Soviet nations. In the 1990s, it was commonly believed that nationalism – be it civic or ethnic – would create a stable majority population whose identity would be supportive of liberal democracy and a market economy¹⁰. State-building and the creation of new economies coincided with the end of Soviet society (which lasted much longer than the dissolution of the USSR) and the emergence of new “national societies”. These processes were closely related and often competed with or undermined each other. This is partially why the complex, non-ethnonational states like the USSR, Yugoslav Federation, and Czechoslovakia could no longer exist or create democratic governance.

Finally, Europeanization was a regional integration process aimed at ensuring that the new political, legal, and economic systems, as well as the societies themselves, would be able to considerably unify around similar norms and values,

⁷ A. Lührmann, S. Lindberg, *A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New About It?*, in *Democratization*, No. 7, 2019, 1099.

⁸ A. Lührmann, S. Lindberg, *A Third Wave of Autocratization*, cit., 1102; M. Minakov, *Sovereignty as a Contested Concept: The Cases of Trumpism and Putinism*, in M. Minakov (Ed.), *Inventing Majorities: Ideological Creativity in Post-Soviet Societies*, Ibidem Press, 2022, 281-320.

⁹ A. Aslund, *How Capitalism Was Built: The Transformation of Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia*, Cambridge University Press, 2013; P. Horvat, G. Evans, *Age, Inequality, and Reactions to Marketization in Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe*, in *European Sociological Review*, No. 6, 2011.

¹⁰ R. Brubaker, *Nationalizing States Revisited: Projects and Processes of Nationalization in Post-Soviet States*, in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, No. 11, 2011; V. Tismaneanu, *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism, and Myth in Post-Communist Europe*, Princeton University Press, 2009.

leading to long-term peace and cooperation among the Eastern and Western European nations. According to the founders of the new Europe in the early 1990s, the future continent was to be a space of harmony between people from Dublin to Vladivostok¹¹.

3. Measuring the Post-Soviet Period

With the understanding of historical periods as sets of continuities, along with these five processual concepts, we can now examine the structure and dialectics of the post-Soviet period.

3.1. Post-Soviet Democratization and Autocratization

The spread of democracy in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s was part of the global process called «the third wave of democratization»¹². Accordingly, the destruction of the Soviet Union gave the nations of the disappeared Eastern Bloc and the collapsed Union a way to realize their own new political agendas: these nations had a historical chance to build states based on liberal democracy and the rule of law. This means that the new states – even if they restored their past statehood as in the cases of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Georgia¹³ – were designed as republics with divided branches of power, distinct central and local governments, and strongly-defended human rights and civil liberties. These new nations, informed by the bitter experience of the communist era, created their political systems by applying the Western model with their own twist: the new legal and political systems were to ensure that communist dictatorship would never return and that one political group or state ideology would never again control all branches of government and society. The new party systems and ideological pluralism were meant to create strong competitors to any radical political group with totalitarian plans, and the constitutional and legal systems were created to ensure both future freedom and a rejection of the past.

If we compare the liberal democracy indices of the countries in the region – taking, say, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine as examples – we can see that in 1989-1991, the new elites and societies established foundations for

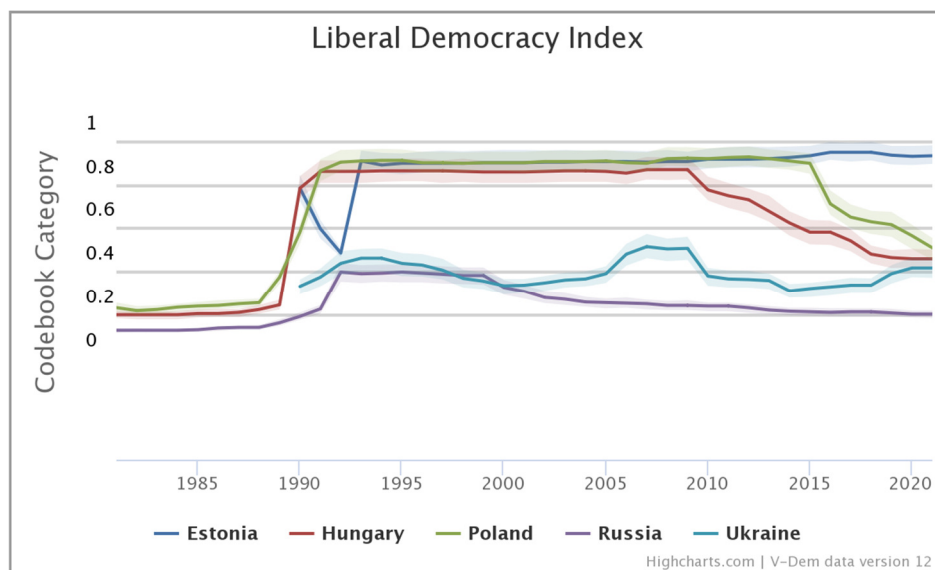
¹¹ See: M. Minakov, *Big Europe's Gap: Dynamic Obstacles for Integration between EU and EAU*, in A. Di Gregorio, A. Angeli (Eds.), *The Eurasian Economic Union and the European Union: Moving Toward a Greater Understanding*, Eleven International Publishing, 2017; E. Avdaliani, *The End of "Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok"*, in *The Bar Elan University*, 8 March 2019, <https://besacenter.org/economic-space-lisbon-vladivostok/>; R. Sakwa, *Sad Delusions: The Decline and Rise of Greater Europe*, in *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, No. 1, 2021.

¹² S. Huntington, *Democracy's Third Wave*, in *Journal of Democracy*, No. 2, 1991.

¹³ All declarations of sovereignty and independence approved by the republics leaving the USSR can be divided into two groups: those that established new states and those that reinstated the statehood interrupted by the Soviet Union's intervention. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Georgia belong to the latter group.

democratization in all cases (see Graph 1)¹⁴. Liberal democracy is defined by the extent to which a political system respects civil liberties and the rule of law, upholds an independent judiciary, and maintains effective checks and balances, and the index shows how emerging states created institutions according to the widespread beliefs concerning the third democratization model¹⁵. The liberal principle of democracy, which takes a “negative” view of political power insofar as it judges the quality of democracy by the limits placed on government, is thus a good measure for post-Soviet state-building.

Graph 1. Liberal Democracy Index for Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine, 1981-2021



Graph 1 demonstrates that after the initial stage of the democratization efforts, the paths of the five nations diverged. Estonia, Hungary, and Poland, as well as many other countries in the region close to old European democracies, felt a stronger pull from the Western political and legal systems, so they continued to implement the chosen model for at least two post-Soviet decades. On the other hand, the Russian and Ukrainian political regimes began changing their adherence to the model within a decade. Both countries entered the 21st century with visible autocratic trends in their newly established democracies. However, while autocratization was fully implemented in Putin’s Russia, Ukraine has twice demonstrated its desire to return to democracy during the Maidan protests of 2004-

¹⁴ Hereafter I use the data and evaluations from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database, <https://v-dem.net/about/v-dem-project/methodology/>. V-Dem provides researchers with valuable data and data analysis at different levels of generalization by indicator, set of indicators, country, and region.

¹⁵ For the indicator methodology and methods of their collection and analysis see K. Marquardt, *V-Dem Methodology*, <https://v-dem.net/about/v-dem-project/methodology/>.

2005 and 2013-2014. In total, Ukrainian society has gone through two waves of democratization and two periods of autocratization in the last 30 years, while the Russian population has witnessed an ongoing autocratic trend for over 20 years.

In the second decade of the 21st century, the democratization trend was losing its energy in Central Europe as well. While the Baltic countries have managed to keep their liberal democratic quality at least until 2022, Hungary and Poland have begun to move away from liberal democracy. Since approximately 2015, the post-communist democratization impulse has weakened, and «the third wave of autocratization» has tempted the power elites of the region to make an «illiberal turn»¹⁶. Today, the Eastern European and Northern Eurasian political systems can be divided into three types:

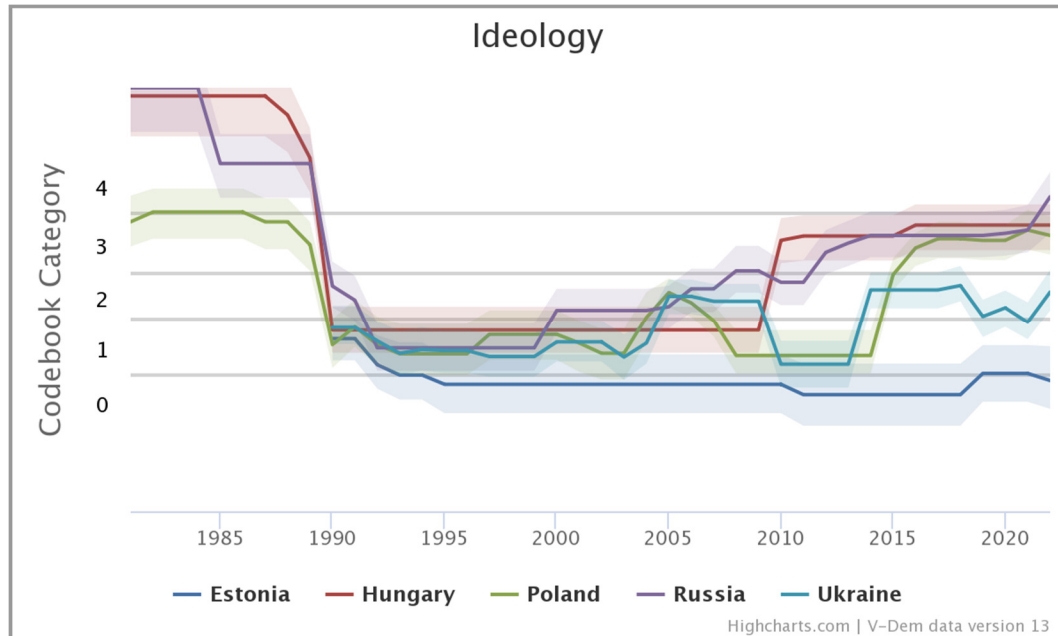
- 1) those defending the remainders of post-Soviet democratization (Estonia and other Baltic countries);
- 2) flawed democracies with hybrid regimes (Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine); and
- 3) the autocratic states of Azerbaijan, Belarus, Russia, and other central Asian countries.

The ideological monopoly buried by Gorbachev's liberalization in 1989-1990 arguably returned to most post-Soviet political cultures at the beginning of the 21st century. The ideology index measures the extent to which the government of a given country promotes a certain ideology to justify the existing regime¹⁷. The data in Graph 2 demonstrate that after the de-ideologization of post-Soviet nations, the governments in most countries (excluding Estonia) returned to ideologized politics at the beginning of the 21st century, and in the last five to eight years, they have developed policies reminiscent of the Soviet-era ideological monopoly. In Russia, re-ideologization began with the rule of Vladimir Putin and reached a significant level by 2012. In Ukraine, attempts to establish an ideological monopoly coincided with the post-revolutionary rule of 2005-2009 and 2014-2018.

¹⁶ See: A. Lührmann, S. Lindberg, *A Third Wave of Autocratization*, cit., 1100; A. Sajó, R. Uitz, S. Holmes (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, Routledge, 2021, 3-4.

¹⁷ See V-Dem database methodology.

Graph 2. Ideology Index for Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine, 1981-2021



Therefore, it is clear that the post-Soviet democratic impulse is exhausted and no longer determines any processes in the region. Autocratization, however, has spread throughout the region, supported by the war-born militarization of state-building and securitization of politics.

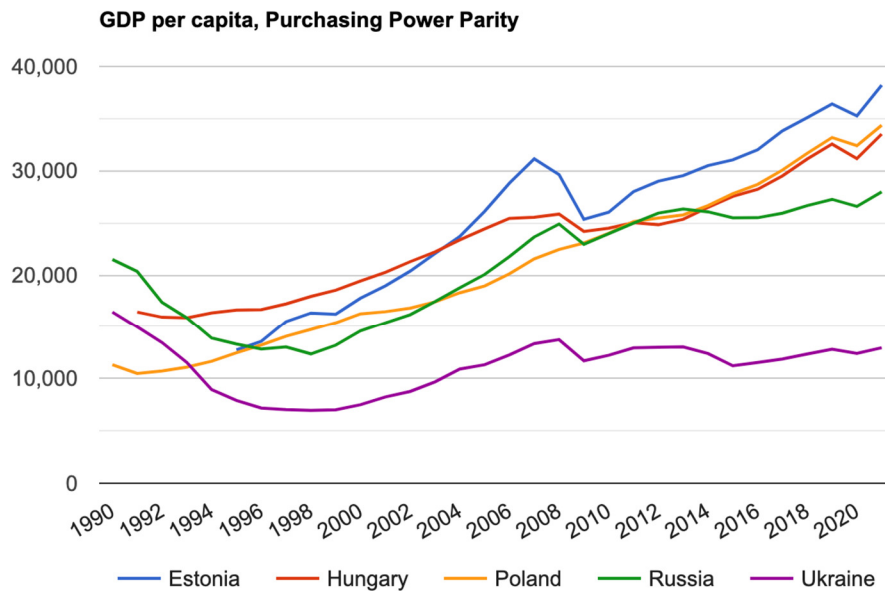
3.2. Post-Soviet Market Economies

Post-Soviet marketization aimed to establish new economies oriented to the neoliberal market model and participation in the global economy. Due to the economic transformation, all societies of the region suffered a huge loss of GDP in the early 1990s and a return to significant economic inequality¹⁸. The deep and comprehensive reforms were expected to include the privatization of huge socialist economic legacies, the creation of an entrepreneurial class, and the formation of economically self-sufficient citizens (a so-called middle class) that would not be willing to depend on the government and would drive democratic reforms. Thus, the new social structure with new classes would prevent the communists from returning to power.

Before the global financial crisis of 2008, most countries of the region, including Latvia, Poland, and Russia, had significantly improved their economies, as shown in Graph 3.

¹⁸ P. Horvat, G. Evans, *Age, Inequality, and Reactions to Marketization in Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe*, cit.

Graph 3. GDP PPP of Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine, 1990-2021

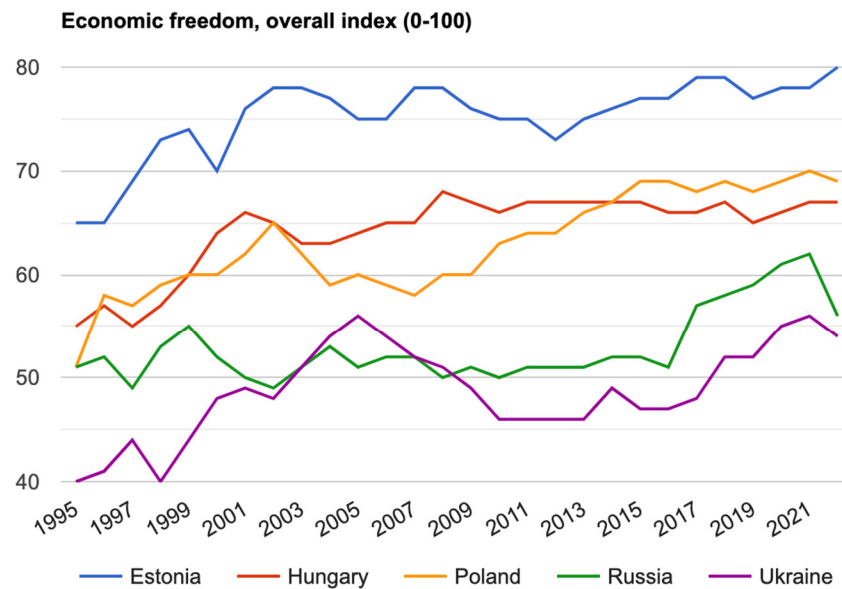


Measure: U.S. dollars
Source: The World Bank

However, some post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine (shown in Graph 3), Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova, did not manage to create economic systems that would create an economically self-sufficient citizenry. In Ukraine, the GDP growth was very limited despite the country's adherence to democracy; instead, the combination of political freedom and economic malfunction facilitated strong corruption and an influential oligarchy. The oligarchic clans organized many «patronal pyramids» whose constant competition would not allow the autocrats or the liberal democrats to successfully govern Ukraine¹⁹.

¹⁹ M. Minakov, *Republic of Clans: The Evolution of the Ukrainian Political System*, in B. Magyar (Ed.), *Stubborn Structures: Reconceptualizing Post-Communist Regimes*, CEU Press, 2019, 88-99.

Graph 4. Economic Freedom in Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine, 1995-2022



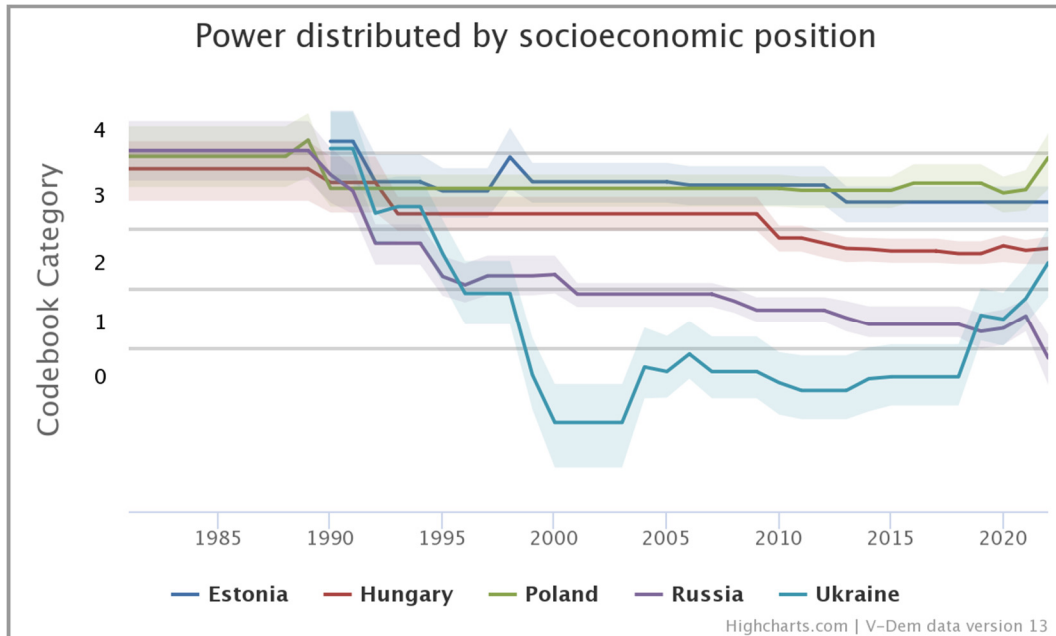
Measure: index points
Source: The Heritage Foundation

While democracy and market economies were generally mutually supportive in Western and Central Europe, in Eastern Europe, economic success supported the creation of one patronal pyramid and autocratic regime²⁰. The further to the east, the less economically free the post-Soviet societies were. Thus, economic success did not necessarily support political and economic freedom, and economic freedom did not necessarily spur the fast growth of the GDP or political freedom, as can be seen in Graph 4.

The post-Soviet market economies differ among themselves regarding the level of political inequality they produce. By measuring power as distributed by socioeconomic position, the V-Dem database provides data demonstrating that the EU socioeconomic model has kept the once-communist societies rather equal, at least in terms of the nexus of socioeconomic position and access to political power. In Russia and Ukraine, however, richness directly translates into political power (Graph 5), though this link was somewhat broken in Ukraine during the Covid-19 pandemic.

²⁰ M. Lavigne, *The Economics of Transition: From Socialist Economy to Market Economy*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999; H. Hale, *Russian Patronal Politics Beyond Putin*, in *Daedalus*, No. 2, 2017.

Graph 5. Power Distributed According to Socioeconomic Position in Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine, 1981-2021



Marketization has indeed changed the economies and societies in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia. However, this change did not always support democratization in the post-Soviet period.

3.3. Building the Post-Soviet Nations as Part of One Big Europe

In the post-Soviet period, “nationalization” also led to unexpected results in the region’s development. According to the post-Soviet social imagination, the success of democratic and market reforms depended on their stable support by the majority of the population. It was commonly believed that limited nationalism (be it civic or ethnic) could create a majority whose identity would be supportive – or at least not hostile towards – liberal democracy and a market economy²¹. Therefore, in the last three decades, post-Soviet state-building was guided not only by the goal of democracy and the rule of law but also by the nationalization of statehood, politics, and the economy²². The complex states – the Soviet Union, Yugoslav Federation, and even Czechoslovakia – could not exist within the frameworks of such a monistic political imagination.

The nations of Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia entered the 21st century as nation-states wherein democracy and nationalism were supposed to be balanced by

²¹ R. Brubaker, *Nationalizing States Revisited*, cit.; V. Tismaneanu, *Fantasies of Salvation*, cit.

²² S. Bianchini, M. Minakov, *State-Building Politics after the Yugoslav and Soviet Collapse. The Western Balkans and Ukraine in a Comparative Perspective*, in *Southeastern Europe*, No. 3, 2018.

Europeanization. Europeanization, the fourth major tendency of post-Soviet development, was connected with the idea that the new nations would live in a common space of peaceful coexistence. The One Big Europe project (also known as the Common European Home) was strongly influenced by the imagination of the Gorbachev-Kohl (Habermas-Yakovlev) generation²³. The future Europe, according to this idea, would become a space of peace and cooperation among the nations from Dublin to Vladivostok.

The first organization to make this vision a reality was the CoE. This organization promoted liberal democratic values and norms, as well as human rights, among all the nations from the British Isles to Russia's Far East. Around 2003, it looked like the CoE had managed to achieve its goal: except for Belarus, all states had more or less institutionalized the core norms and values of the Council²⁴.

The European Union created even stronger "European integration" but did not include the post-Soviet nations (except for the Baltic ones) to the same extent. The EU managed to bring together the nations of Western and Central Europe and organize them in a comprehensively integrated political, legal, economic, and financial system. In addition, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), a guardian of the Helsinki Final Act's legacy, established another common framework for the Eastern European and Northern Eurasian nations to peacefully coexist in one Big Europe²⁵.

However, most of these organizations have failed. Today, after the onset of the Russian war on Ukraine, the CoE and OSCE cannot provide a platform for continental dialogue: the aggressive Russia and its ally Belarus are absent from the European dialogue. The EU, weakened by Brexit and the socioeconomic impact of the war in Ukraine, is trying to reinvent itself and its role for the bigger Europe. Even the meaning of the term Europeanization has started to lose its normative force, as the economic and geopolitical interests of the EU are increasingly in conflict with its core values and norms. Thus, all four post-Soviet tendencies are losing their energies and meanings, preparing Europe for a new era. In the last eight years, since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the Donbas War, military conflict has reorganized the continent of Europe according to a new geopolitical logic²⁶.

²³ E. Avdaliani, *The End of "Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok*, cit.

²⁴ On this, see *The Council of Europe at 70: Milestones and Achievements*, in *Council of Europe*, 5 May 2019, www.coe.int/en/web/secretary-general/-/the-council-of-europe-at-70-milestones-and-achievements.

²⁵ M. Bauer, C. Knill, D. Pitschel, *Differential Europeanization in Eastern Europe: The Impact of Diverse EU Regulatory Governance Patterns*, in *Journal of European Integration*, No. 4, 2007; N. Timuş, *Democracy for Export: The Europeanisation of Electoral Laws in the East European Neighbourhood*, in *East European Politics*, No. 3, 2013.

²⁶ R. Youngs, *Europe Reset: New Directions for the EU*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017; M. Minakov, *The Militarist Remapping of Europe and Northern Eurasia*, in *Focus Ukraine*, 2 November 2022, www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/militarist-remapping-europe-and-northern-eurasia.

4. Summing Up the Post-Soviet Period

The post-Soviet period was a thirty-year period in which the eastern part of Big Europe's nations showed their political destructiveness and creativity, their power to imagine and act, and their commitment to and fear of freedom and prosperity.

The term "post-Soviet" still provokes an aversion in many of us – especially in the last ten years – as the autocratic wave has revived Soviet practices in many countries of our continent. The more the societies of our region fall back into the regime of ideological monopoly, resembling the Soviet political culture, the harsher our reaction will be to the mention of the Soviet, even when qualified with the prefix "post". This symptom is connected to the fact that elements of the Soviet system survived through the caesura everywhere: in some countries, these fragments survived in marginal forms, while in others, especially in Russia and Belarus, the Soviet elements substantially formed their current political orders.

Still, the emphasis is on the first part of "post-Soviet". The term refers both to a historical period and to a social experience based on the rejection of Soviet practices and values. The post-Soviet period was full of efforts aimed at self-overcoming and revolutionary attempts to create new social worlds in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia. It was a period of conquering the Soviet communist legacy and the totalitarian experience. The tragedy of the post-Soviet era stems from too much fear of the past and too little daring innovation. As the turbulent year of 2022 showed, too many Soviet elements have survived the caesura of 1989-1991.

The post-Soviet transformational tetrad lost its developmental energy by the early 2020s. Democratization slowed down or reverted, giving way to autocratic tendencies in most of the countries of the region. Market economies changed the structures of Soviet/communist societies, but the new class structures did not necessarily support democracy and the rule of law. Finally, nationalization increasingly contradicted the Europeanization agenda. The recent Russian aggression against Ukraine and the immediate polarization of the continent thus show that the post-Soviet period has ended, and a new period for new geopolitical regions has begun.

5. Looking into the Future of Europe and Eurasia

The post-Soviet era ended with the Russian Federation's unprovoked attack on Ukraine. Although the military conflict in Ukraine began in 2014, the demons of the new historical caesura were released in February 2022. This event marked a rupture with post-Soviet continuity and set in motion the catastrophic processes that are now changing the region and influencing the global rules-based order.

It is now clear that the globalized world order led by the West is in the past. The nature and quality of the debate at the G20 Forum of 2022 revealed: growing cleavages between the G7 and the remaining thirteen countries, tensions between

the emerging geopolitical blocs, and the fragmentation of the global economy into economic/financial zones²⁷.

The antagonism between the West and Russia has become a multilayered conflict, with Ukraine being forced to act as the site of the long Russian-Ukrainian war of attrition. The second year of the war shows that the war of attrition further translates into the international relations of attrition, at least on the European continent. This war has all chances – as the recent “Polish missile crisis” (on November 15, 2022) showed – to extend into the countries bordering Ukraine. Moreover, nations have divided into those showing solidarity with Ukraine (the vast majority of the EU and NATO member-states), those supporting Russia (Belarus, Iran), and those gaining from the conflict in Europe (Azerbaijan, China, India, Turkey, etc.).

Before the war in Ukraine, Europe had its ever-more-complicated political geography fragmented by the actions of Russia, the UK, and Turkey, each of which has its own European project. With the start of the war in Ukraine, the new Iron Curtain has been reinstalled, as NATO has reorganized itself around the mission to defend Central and Western European countries from Russian expansionism. Now, Europe is being re-imagined and re-institutionalized as the continent of systemic conflicts and competing visions of the future.

It is too early to define the exact processes that will shape the new (dis)order in Europe, but some early signals can be interpreted as suggesting three processes: the redefinition of the global core, the militarization of Europe, and the social homogenization of European and Eurasian nations.

First, the former world-system’s core-periphery structure is undergoing a thorough revision. Already in 2022, countries like Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania demonstrated their growing role and ability to make critical sovereign decisions influencing other nations in the EU. Meanwhile, the political role of the old European democracies is declining in the Union. If Central Europe’s political rise is supported by economic and cultural influence, it could become part of the global core. Furthermore, the global role of China is becoming more important, turning it into an alternative geopolitical pole to the United States.

Second, militarization – as the primary political imaginary of this period and long-term sociopolitical process – redefines Europe as a space of many different conflicts, where the traumas of the 20th century and new ills coalesce to establish a new era. As a political imaginary, militarization is already changing European state- and nation-building models. It influences national policies and creates completely different foundations for the future political geography of Europe. If European

²⁷ P. Wintour, *G20’s Dysfunctional Family Show Little Sign of Working Together in a Crisis*, in *The Guardian*, 15 November 2022, www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/15/little-sign-of-recovery-at-g20-at-either-political-or-economic-level.

intellectuals and politicians were recently proud of their societies' post-heroic conditions²⁸, today they sing glory to the heroes of the war in Ukraine.

Third, European and Eurasian societies seem to have opted for homogenization, which translates into stronger limits on cultural, social, and ideological pluralism within their nations. The freedoms that were so natural in our societies and communities over the last thirty years are entering the stormy waters of the dominant-majority social life.

If these three processes continue, Europe – instead of being a region “from Lisbon and Vladivostok” defined by inspiring symbols – would turn into the symbolic space stretching from Belfast, the city of many re-emerging and new conflicts, to Magadan, once the Gulag capital and now the source of cadres for Russian forces in Ukraine. We have strayed from the post-Soviet and post-heroic eras, and we are now marching into the unknown territory of the future world.

²⁸ T. Elsaesser, *Post-Heroische Erzählungen: Jean Luc Nancy, Claire Denis und Beau Travail*, in H. Kappelhoff, A. Streiter (Eds.), *Die Frage der Gemeinschaft: Das westeuropäische Kino nach 1945*, Brill, 2012, 67-94.