
НОВАЯ ДЕЙСТВИТЕЛЬНОСТЬ И НОВЫЕ ИСТОЧНИКИ

Region-making at Last in the Former Soviet Area: Some Suggestions for Future Research

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In March and October 2017, two workshops took place at Sciences Po Bordeaux, gathering together scholars of comparative regionalism and area studies specialists. We engaged in a constructive debate to contribute to and revitalise studies on the regional reordering of post-Soviet spaces. We investigated, beyond Eurocentric views, the renewed regionalisation processes that have taken place in the former Soviet area since the 2010s. For the past twenty years, studies on regionalism have undergone major changes, moving from institutionalist and top-down approaches that have focused on the design and policy outputs of regional organisations to the attempt of understanding the diversified and endogenous factors that shape region-building and region-making in non-Western worlds. We thus aim to take stock of that debate, nourishing it with a challenging, area-based, case study. In that respect, the regionalisation of global order calls for further studies on under-researched aspects such as the impact of business communities in promoting regional agendas or the narratives on collective identities fabricated by political leaders. In particular, sanctions and counter-sanctions seem to have strengthened this rhetoric moves, putting values and perceptions at the centre of regionalisation in the reconfigured post-Soviet space.

This article resumes the research agenda that resulted from a collective endeavour, and that has been driven by recent changes in international politics and the foreign policies of states which are – more or less reluctantly – positioned in post-Soviet spaces. The establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) provides a further case for reflecting on the 25-year trajectory of region-building and region-making, which deserves investigation beyond assessments and interpretations based on tangible processes and material outcomes.

Key words: regionalism, regionalisation, regional trade agreements, identity, Eurasia, the CIS, Russia

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a 25-year trajectory of region-building and region-making in the former Soviet area has materialised. While the Soviet Union initiated its path towards dismemberment, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) had already been designed as a mechanism to channel the impact of this fragmentation. The story of the CIS has been peppered with criticisms, protests, and contestation: it has been delegitimised at different times by a number of national leaders, regional officials, policy-makers and the media of different member states. And yet, the CIS architecture has not been dismantled; on the contrary, it has been extended by the addition of military and economic pillars, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Community respectively. There have been other regionalist experiments in the same geopolitical expanse, some of which have proved to be a flash in the pan of international politics. In contrast, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) began as a loose multi-bilateral cooperation among Russia, China and three Central Asian countries only to be fully institutionalized years later.

These developments have rarely mobilised innovative conceptualisations and breakthroughs in understanding the “texture” of the post-Soviet region, that is, how different norms, institutions, practices and governance instruments emerge and develop in that context.

Libman surveyed the literature about regional integration in the former Soviet space and subsumed the features of an “average post-Soviet integration paper” by examining work produced by both Russian and non-Russian scholars [Libman 2012]. Based on Libman’s review, the mainstream literature about the post-Soviet region reportedly suffers from four major limitations: first, an imbalance in which normative and/or descriptive approaches outnumber analytic perspectives and explanatory attempts; second, a highly marked Eurocentric bias resulting in loose comparative practices: the EU is often presented as a reference model from which regional actors can learn or distance themselves. Third, region-building in the post-Soviet space is frequently introduced as an aspect of Russian foreign policy, thereby depriving other post-Soviet countries of any agency. Fourth, all instances of post-Soviet regionalism are considered in terms of dysfunctionality and non-effectiveness [Russo 2018].

This literature agrees that post-Soviet regionalisms equal their institutional embodiments, that is, the regional organisations that have proliferated in the former Soviet area either by establishing new avenues for coordination and cooperation (i.e., created *ex novo* in the wake of the disintegration of the USSR) or when post-Soviet countries participate in pre-existing initiatives and platforms (whose enlargement agendas have extended to “Newly Independent States”). Further, as per the first case, post-Soviet regional organisations are referred to as unsuccessful projects that have failed to produce integration or other forms of regional governance (see for example [Kubicek 2009]). In other words, it seems to be rare for scholars to expand their gaze beyond regionally-scaled policy-making processes and outputs. However, merely counting the number of regional organisations, looking at their institutional design and/or formal and codified expressions, and interpreting them solely in terms of power politics does not consider the entire *problématique*. As a matter of fact, the former Soviet space has undergone complex morphogenetic shifts that have resulted in restructuring polities, spatialities, and identities.

More recently, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) was established and while it may be seen merely as the umpteenth project to reshape a regional order whose contours appear to be in permanent transition, it may offer scholars and practitioners new avenues to think about the restructuration of the whole region and how to interpret it. The EEU has been presented by its supporters as an ambitious project of unprecedentedly integrated and coherent regional agreement in the area. However, official missions and hidden agendas, the mechanisms of sovereignty-pooling and its impact on member states deserve further investigation. It also has induced foreign policy makers in many former Soviet countries to reposition themselves, more or less reluctantly, more or less tactically. The development of the EEU has unveiled latent competition among different structures of cooperation and schemes of co-optation, and an “odi-et-amō” reference to the EU, leading to an ambivalent process of othering. The conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia generated a number of contradictory discourses on the states and national identities of these countries that vary depending on “where they position themselves” and “who they belong to”. In this respect, the EEU has been presented by its founders and advocates as an alternative path to globalization or as a civilizational project backed by the Putin administration [Lane, Samokhvalov 2015]. The sanctions by the EU against Russian officials and the counter-sanctions implemented in retaliation by Prime Minister Medvedev in August 2014 provided a basis for narratives of identity formation in which the concept of sovereignty and Russia’s “manifest destiny” play a major role. Russia’s conservative turn, which has manifested in both domestic politics and foreign policy, has contributed to a renewed perspective on regional integration in the post-Soviet space, further linking it to the material and symbolic resources offered by the New Silk Road projects.

These inputs have driven our attempt to rethink the history of post-Soviet regionalism, considering it not only in material terms but also according to its identity and normative drivers and implications. While seeking to contribute to the reflection kindled by many scholars of (comparative) regionalism calling for a long-awaited conceptual renewal, we are well aware that the range of concepts invoked and employed will not necessarily introduce a breath of fresh air into the many debates potentially touched by our endeavours. It is likely that both ‘regionally-oriented disciplinarists’ (primarily disciplinary scholars looking at regional phenomena, often comparatively) and ‘discipline-oriented regionalists’ (primarily area specialists who have accepted and adopted theoretical frameworks from a particular discipline, [Acharya 2006]) will have either grappled with the conceptual saturation of their respective field of inquiry (i.e. regionalism) or developed an (understandable) intellectual repulsion/aversion to categories such as “post-Soviet” that tend to replicate a never-ending story of transition, in-betweenness, and orientalisation of the “East”.

We believe that this proliferation of regional institutions, schemes and initiatives has been explained through identity frames and shifts in many ways: identities to be protected from the exposures to globalization [Lane 2015]; and, conversely, identities to be interconnected at the supranational level to cope with the failures of nation-state templates. There is a fundamental question, however, that has yet to be answered: whose identity? Different responses to that question need to be taken into account, ranging from state identities to presidents’ identities, from official narratives to bureaucrats’ and practitioners’ discourses. When dealing with identities, we do not assume fixed and objective features anchored in cultural, social or historical roots. Rather, we consider the

changing nature of ideational factors and their plurality. This perspective sheds light on the multiple identities available and, from time to time, assembled and fabricated while exploring by whom, why and how; and how they compete and are articulated in order to adopt, adapt, contest, resist and/or reject ideas and norms circulating and disseminated at the global level.

The research agenda we propose is premised on the acknowledgment that the debate will advance through going “beyond the formal and legal dimensions of regionalism to use micro-level analyses and to pay attention to agency as well as informality in organizational context” [Parthenay 2016, p. 13]. In his call for establishing a political sociology of comparative regionalism, Parthenay advocates unpacking the agents which convey region-building processes. Further, his approach promotes the introduction of “new observation points such as daily interactions, organizational discrepancies and/or symbolic representations” by studying the “work of regional officials; organizational archives and original documents as the embodiment of a set of institutional cultures and practices; articulations between formal texts and daily (informal) practices of actors; articulation between formal and real institutional functions; articulations between formal and informal rules; interactions between individuals (places, nature, types); power configuration in different contexts” [Parthenay 2016, p. 17]. In other words, it is also possible to study regionalism through ethnographic endeavours and bottom-up and grounded perspectives as well as inductive research designs.

These aspirations to complement formal institutionalist approaches are not isolated; they can be seen in a number of scholarly contributions which, for example, take into account the integration effects of business communities, local bureaucracies, professional networks, as well as the practices of local actors. By conceptualizing ‘trans-state’ regionalism, Bach pioneered this approach and shed light on the way some categories of people (e.g., diaspora, migrants, traders and border residents) are able to “transact across territories and borders” [Bach 2015, p. 73].

In a similar vein, Soderbaum models this move to diverge from policy-led and “administrative” studies of regionalism by setting forth a research agenda to overcome the divide between “regions from above” and “regions from below” (and the widespread binary classification of regionalism vs. regionalisation) [Soderbaum 2015; Soderbaum 2018]. Drawing on sociology and geography, he rejects the idea of regions as “backdrops, containers or locations” [Soderbaum 2018, p. 34] embedded in pre-given sets of spaces and scales; instead, he posits that a wide gamut of processes, strategies, actions, ideas and identities encounter and mould regions. The latter are made and unmade by both socio-economic dynamics and cognitive and imaginative ones, such as imagined geographies and regional imaginaries. According to this view, regions are socially constructed and politically contested: by considering these political dimensions of regionalism, scholars are able to shift the focus back to agency, paving the way for considering it “a political struggle between various social forces over the definition of the region, how it should be organized politically, and its insertion into the global order. Alternative, transformative and counter-hegemonic visions of regionalism may emerge in response, depending on the dominant form of regionalism and who sets the agenda” [Soderbaum 2018, p. 35]. Likewise, we put forward a research agenda focusing on the inter-subjective dimensions of region formation and region-making that have unfolded in the former Soviet space.

Constructivist approaches to regionalism are certainly not a novelty: at different times, a number of well-known scholars have acknowledged the theoretical point that regions

are neither fixed nor natural [Katzenstein 2005; Fawn 2009; Shaw, Grant, Cornelissen 2011] and questioned the geographical and/or political characterization of regions, arguing that they are actually socially constructed facts. Accordingly, regions are neither “objective” nor “pre-determined”; rather, they are made and unmade, intentionally or unintentionally, endogenously or exogenously through actions, interactions, routines, and practices. As Neumann maintains, regions are what region-makers make of them [Neumann 1994, p. 53]; further, if we apply a post-structuralist lens to this issue, region-makers themselves can be seen as constituted by region-making process. Therefore, not only are regions what region-makers make of them, but at the same time region-makers are also what regions make of them [Ferabolli 2015, pp. 22–23]. In looking at the post-Soviet region we have studied how and why certain “social actors include it in their discourse as such, attempt to clarify it, categorise it, regulate and administer it” [Pace 2005, p. 43]; moreover, we propose a critical focus on cognitive, ideational and normative factors of aggregation and the way regions come to be framed as a “imagined community” built on “common experience and identity, custom and practice” [Fawcett 2004, p. 432].

The scholarship exploring the relations and encounters between the EU and Russia has often taken into account the dimension of identity; unfortunately, however, some of this inquiry has resulted in essentialist accounts of the dynamics of conflict, competition and cooperation in what has been controversially termed the “near abroad” or the “common neighbourhood”. More recently, a multi-authored study to integrate nationalism scholarship into IR constructivism has set the stage for examining “the many ways in which identity [...] affected the foreign policy behaviours of the regional states, as well as the overall security dynamics in the region [in post-Soviet Central Eurasia]” and “the ways in which identity [...] enjoys an intricate, mutually constitutive relationship with the strategic context in which it bears its effects on the state and the region” [Ismayilov 2015].

We are well aware that the concept of identity is overstretched and overburdened. The seminal work by Brubaker and Cooper is illuminating in this respect [Brubaker, Cooper 2000], as they systematise the multiple meanings granted to the term “identity” into three decisive strands: identification and categorization; self-understanding and social location; and commonality, connectedness, and groupness. In addressing the impact of identities on international politics and behaviours and the use of symbolic politics as a technique for articulating ideas, values and beliefs for political purposes, Hudson’s work on culture and foreign policy provides important examples of how cultural notions – i.e. the collective models of identity – change over time and provide important explanations for shifting behaviours in foreign policy [Hudson 1997].

Our efforts study the symbolic, ideational, imaginative, and normative dimensions of collective interactions (among diverse pools of actors are state leaders and agents, officials and bureaucrats, and representatives of sub-national, transnational and supranational communities); in other words, the role that ideas, ideologies and identities play in shaping and reshaping groupings and coalitions in the kind of unsettled and transitional region that the post-Soviet region currently exemplifies. We do not, however, intend to deal with the manifold range of foreign policy behavioural patterns. Rather, we focus on the role of identities in regionalisation processes, proceeding from the assumption that “regionness, like identity, is not given once and for all: it is built up and changes” [Fawcett 2005, p. 26].

Our research agenda does not intend to revisit the time-worn debate on whether the post-Soviet region belongs to Europe or Asia; likewise, it does not seek to consider it a specific region incomparable to any other. Rather, we propose to investigate processes of building imagined geographies and rationales of collective identity and how they affect foreign policy making and regional structuration in spaces and territories that are identified with buffer zones, peripheries, borderlands or frontiers. Terms such as “Near Abroad” or “Neighbourhood” that are commonly used to identify the post-Soviet space or some sub-regions therein are deeply permeated by the conceptualization of (at least some) post-Soviet countries as characterized by limited local agency. Moreover, the study of post-Soviet countries is entrenched in new forms of “Orientalism” filtered through a politicization of knowledge production, the replication of Cold-War-style accounts and the difficulty of uncovering the field using ethnographic approaches. Against this background, our endeavour is not only to uncover different frames, discourses and narratives, but also to identify the actors and networks involved in the multiple local narratives produced in these countries in relation to their international and regional actorness, and the instruments (both material and symbolic) that they deploy.

Finally, we contribute to the broader, Europe-wide endeavour of renewing the study of former Soviet states and societies, a project that is in urgent need of innovative intellectual lenses in these challenging times. In reality, we believe that developing original ways of studying post-Soviet countries requires collective efforts, and we hope this article will contribute to and renovate existing scholarship with new conceptual stimuli for further research.

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Региональное строительство на постсоветском пространстве: некоторые предложения для будущих исследований

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Статья посвящена анализу проблем реорганизации постсоветского пространства. Общий тренд региональных исследований в последние годы сдвигается от принципов универсализма и глобализма к разнообразию моделей региональной органи-

зации, связанных с экономической интеграцией, влиянием бизнеса на формирование региональной повестки и созданием политическими лидерами коллективной идентичности. В фокусе анализа – Евразийский экономический союз (ЕАЭС) и его предшественник – Евразийское экономическое сообщество (ЕврАзЭС).

История созданного после распада СССР Содружества Независимых Государств (СНГ) была сложной и драматичной, вплоть до делегитимизации этой организации рядом национальных лидеров, региональных чиновников и политиков различных государств-членов. И все же архитектура СНГ не демонтирована, а, наоборот, расширена за счет добавления соответственно военной и экономической опор: Организации Договора о коллективной безопасности и Евразийского экономического сообщества, просуществовавшего с 2001 по 2014 гг., переформатированного в ЕАЭС. Параллельно шло формирование Шанхайской организации сотрудничества (ШОС), демонстрирующей многостороннее взаимодействие между Россией, Китаем и тремя странами Центральной Азии. Эти организационные новации способствовали возникновению и развитию новых норм, институтов, практик и инструментов управления в постсоветском регионе, что требует изучения и осмысления.

Недавно созданный ЕАЭС явился амбициозным проектом по интегрированию и согласованию регионального порядка, контуры которого постоянно изменяются. ЕАЭС был представлен его основателями и сторонниками как альтернативный путь глобализации, как цивилизационный проект при поддержке администрации В.В. Путина. События 2014 г., которые привели к санкциям против России и ответным контрсанкциям, усилили нарратив идентичности и суверенитета России. Консервативный сдвиг, проявившийся во внутренней и внешней политике, способствовал трансформации региональной интеграции на постсоветском пространстве, усилению надежд, связанных с перспективами нового Шелкового пути.

В создании подобных региональных инициатив угадывается двойственное начало: с одной стороны, стремление сохранить идентичность, защитить ее от воздействия глобализации; с другой стороны, наоборот, идентичность должна быть перемещена на наднациональный уровень для преодоления проблем национальных государств. Важно отметить, что региональные объединения основаны не только на политических импульсах, но и на деловой активности бизнеса, диаспор, сообществ мигрантов.

Ключевые слова: регионализм, региональные торговые соглашения, Евразийский экономический союз (ЕАЭС), Евразийское экономическое сообщество (ЕврАзЭС), Союз Независимых Государств (СНГ), интеграция

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