

Compte rendu de 'Evolyoutsiya postsovetskogo prostranstva: proshloe, nastoyashchee, budushchee'

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Ivan N. Timofeev, Timur A. Makhmutov (ed.), Evolyoutsiya postsovetskogo prostranstva: proshloe, nastoyashchee, budushchee: khrestomatiya

(Moscow, RSMD, 2017), pp. 384

Evolution of Post-Soviet Space: Past, Present and Future: An Anthology,
(Moscow, RIAC, 2017), pp. 352, ISBN 978-5-6040387-0-3

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CERI-Sciences Po and INALCO

Ivan Timofeev, director of programs, and Timur Makhmutov, deputy program director at the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), have assembled 53 articles analysing the main development trends in the post-Soviet space. The purpose of the book is to explore the domestic and international evolutions of the new independent states from the collapse of the USSR in 1991 to the present, and in the short-term future, the nature of relations between Russia and its neighbours and the consequences of the fall of the Soviet Union and socialist camp. Covering individual countries and the region as a whole, it is organised in three sections: the first focuses on the evolutions during the first 20 years after 1991; the second, on the current state of the post-Soviet nations; the third provides some elements of forecast to 2021.

The book is published by a think-tank headed by Igor Ivanov, former minister of Foreign Affairs (1998-2004) and former secretary of the Security Council (2004–2007), whose mission is "to provide policy recommendations for all of the Russian organisations involved in external affairs". Spearheaded by its Director General, Andrey Kortunov, former deputy director of the Institute for US and Canadian Studies and a leading expert of international affairs, this very active centre is one of the main players in the circle of Russian internationalists. This book is an example among others of its contribution to the spread of the Russian views in this field. Most of the authors are Russian experts and scholars from the Russian Academy of sciences and universities (MGIMO, State University for the Humanities, Tomsk State University, St Petersburg State University, Pacific State University). Some of them are from other post-Soviet states (Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Tajikistan, Belarus, Ukraine). The only one from the West is an émigré from Azerbaijan.

Taken as an ensemble, the book offers a rich and useful insight into the evolutions of this area. It gives a wealth of information on the recent history of this space and on Russia's perception of the external world, especially of its relations with the countries of its former empire. The outspokenness of some of the authors contributes

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to its interest. Nevertheless, the book has its limitations. In particular it does not develop a critical analysis of the Russian policy. Some issues and events, especially the ones related to the Baltic States and Ukraine, are only partly addressed.

The concept of post-Soviet space usually means the 12 CIS (or former CIS) member states. In this book, it also includes the Baltic States, the Central and East European countries, former members of the Warsaw Pact, and the former USSR-aligned Balkan countries: Bulgaria, Romania, Albania and former Yugoslavia (USSR-aligned until 1948). Some of them are today EU and NATO members. Some others are EU accession candidates. During the Soviet years, Bulgaria was called 'the sixteenth republic of the Soviet Union' and considered its "most loyal ally" and, according to the book, most Balkan countries, especially Serbia, "remain closely tied with modern Russia". Although the book focuses predominantly on the former Soviet Union, this definition of the post-Soviet space is a way of showing that Moscow considers that the natural sphere of influence of the Russian Federation is not limited to the CIS space.

The issue of its influence and its place in this area is a central component of the volume. According to Dmitri Trenine, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, in the 90s "the new Russia was focused on sorting out its internal problems and in foreign policy – on fostering relations with the West". But the "imperial idea" was not dead. In the 00s, it was replaced by "the concept of Russia as a great power", a concept which "lays emphasis above all on strengthening its own might and international influence". Reaching this goal has been hampered by a number of difficulties: Russia has suffered many setbacks. "What used to be a common space has become greatly fragmented", emphasises Sergei Markedonov, associate professor at the State University for the Humanities, in an article entitled 'Goodbye Post-Soviet space?' because, among other reasons, external actors have become more and more active in this area. The authors of the book admit that Russia has no longer a monopoly in this area, but their analysis is explicitly or implicitly based on the belief that Russia is still the main leader of the processes, "a key player" and "a powerful centre of attraction". The "near abroad" continues to have a special status in Russia's vision of the external world.

The book highlights the complexities of this area and of the ongoing processes since 1991. On the one hand, it emphasises the diversity of the countries and of their paths. "The common historical past that once linked the peoples of the USSR has ceased to be a uniting factor", the states of this area have "different identities, models of state building, foreign policy interests and values", acknowledges Sergei Markedonov. For instance, what links Turkmenistan, "a 'nation' of tribes" which has a "neo-totalitarian regime" and has isolated itself from the world, and Ukraine, which has turned towards Europe and which is "a unique example of large-scale transformations"? Ultimately, writes Irina Bolgova, research fellow at MGIMO, the major issue "is still a problem of finding a new basis for mutual relations which is not determined by the common past but oriented towards the commonality of the future".

On the other hand, it emphasises the huge difficulties encountered after 1991 by all these States, including Russia. 1991 represented a "radical change of the entire ideology, foreign and domestic policy, economy and even people's views of life". None of these States were prepared for independence. Some of them, especially in Central Asia, did not want it. And all of them (or nearly all of them) were in a very

tense economic and financial situation. Those rich in raw materials, especially Russia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, improved their situation in the 00s. Others (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, etc.) remain among the poorest countries in the world. Russia for its part, very quickly after 1991, faced in addition difficulties in its relationships with some of its neighbours: as soon as they (re)gained independence, the Baltic States which "have always deemed themselves as 'an organic part of the West kidnapped by the Soviet Union'", made the choice of a "confrontational" and " irrational" foreign policy towards Moscow and left the existing Soviet space. Ukraine and Georgia implemented multi-vector foreign policies, distancing themselves from Russia and actively moving towards the Euro-Atlantic community. The fact that the post-Soviet space becomes an area of conflicts and rivalries increase the entanglements: the new independent states "have complicated and often openly hostile relations with one another", and most of all with the Russian Federation. In the 90s, civil war in Tajikistan, armed conflicts in Transnistria, Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, border disputes between Central Asian states, etc. cause huge damage. The book also emphasises the extensive changes of some of these countries. For instance, Kazakhstan which "once was predominantly 'European' has transformed", because of migrations, "into a state where ethnic Kazakhs dominate". It urbanised and brought about spectacular economic change: in 2015, its GDP per capita by purchasing power parity was comparable to Poland's (World Bank data).

In the contributors' assessment of the coming years' trends (up to 2021), the interesting point is the identification of the structuring factors of the evolutions. Whether it is about the internal and international evolutions or about the relationship between Russia and its neighbours, the authors highlight the role of many factors which interact and will interact : the political factors (the socio-political system of many of these states is considered as very unstable), the religious ones (especially in Central Asia), the security ones (challenges posed by present conflicts and threats, including the islamist one), the international ones (the influence and interference of the third powers, especially of the USA, the EU and China, the impact of the relations between Russia and the West), etc. Among these factors, the economic one is by far the element which appears the most determining. The economy is considered by practically all the authors as the main driving force and the determinant on which depends the socio-political stability and the independence of these countries. Demographic and generational factors have also to be taken into account: as an example, around 45 % of the 31 million Uzbek citizens, born after 1991, are under the age of 25. According to some of the authors, another element will continue to influence the relations between Russia and several of its neighbours: russophobia, which is denounced as very strong in the Baltic States, in Ukraine, in some of the Central Asian states and of Central and Eastern Europe. By contrast, there are no references to ideological factors.

Given its structure (past, present and future), the book could have opened the way to an introspective analysis. It has not. Authors do not look inward at the origins of the difficulties encountered. They bind them to policies and/or to mistakes made by other countries, to the incompetence of the former Soviet States, to the interference of external players, etc., but they do not address Russia's own responsibilities; they do not question the adequacy or appropriateness of Russian policies. As an example, they criticise the "anti-Russian stance" in the Baltic States, but they do not debate the origins and the reasons of this stance. And neither the causes nor the impact and

implications in the post-Soviet space of the annexation of Crimea and of the Russian intervention in Donbass are analysed. On the Ukrainian issue, the editors of the book gave the floor to two outspoken authors. Andrey Okara, director of the Center for East-European Studies, highlights the importance of Ukraine for the future of the Russian Federation: following Zbigniew Brzezinski, he writes that "without Ukraine, Russia loses the imperial universality and diversity". Far from the official Russian discourse about "one people", he emphasises "mental and political differences" between Russians and Ukrainians which resulted in "gross misunderstanding". He concludes by saying that

"Russia, more than anybody else, is interested in the full-fledged existence of Ukraine with the preservation of all specific features of Ukrainian society ... Precisely such a Ukraine can contribute to the systemic transformation of the Russian development model ..."

Anton Naychuk, expert at the International Center for Advanced Studies in Ukraine, is one of the few authors who explicitly mentions "Russia's aggressive foreign policy" in Ukraine, "the presence of Russian forces on the territory of the self-proclaimed republics" in Donbass and "the annexation" of Crimea, which has "a destructive influence", one of the few to criticise openly the Minsk Agreements, a part of which "runs counter to Ukraine's national interests". But the issues of Crimea and Donbass are not analysed, either in these two articles or in the others and the issues of the nature of the conflict and of the Russian policy in Ukraine are not addressed either. However. this conflict and this policy are among the main paradigms of the evolutions of the post-Soviet space.

During the Soviet era and post-1991, academic research on the Republics of the USSR and subsequently on the new independent States was poorly developed, especially but not only on political issues. One of the outcomes of this situation was the low number of specialists of these countries: the Russian Academy of Sciences had many excellent experts on the United States, but very few on Ukraine and on other new States. That is probably one factor of explanation of the difficulties of Russian policy towards its former empire. This book shows that the situation has changed. Today in Russia there are a number of interesting and even outspoken experts and scholars of these countries. Nevertheless, as we have discussed, the book has its limitations, which confirms that the quality of research and publications depends largely on the vitality of academic debates, that is to say on the assertiveness of academics in a political system which is more and more controlled.