Instytut Europy Środkowej
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IEŚ

9/2021

POLICY PAPERS

2021 9

George Soroka, Tomasz Stępniewski, Mark Kramer, Serhii Plokhy, Thomas F. Remington, Kataryna Wolczuk, Paul D'Anieri

30 Years on From the Fall of the Soviet Union: Western Scholarly Perspectives

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IEŚ
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POLICY
PAPERS

Publishing series IEŚ Policy Papers
Number 9/2021
Series editors Beata Surmacz and Tomasz Stępniewski

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ISBN 978-83-66413-71-9
Published and edited
Instytut Europy Środkowej I Institute of Central Europe
ul. Niecała 5
20-080 Lublin
www.ies.lublin.pl
Cover design and typesetting www.targonski.pl
Cover photo © Bennian | shutterstock.com
Print www.drukarniaakapit.pl

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George Soroka and Tomasz Stępniewski

30 Years on From the Fall of the Soviet Union: Western Scholarly Perspectives – Introduction

On 25 December 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as president of the Soviet Union, bringing about the dissolution of the USSR. In 2021 we commemorated the 30th anniversary of this momentous occurrence, the legacies of which are still very much with us today. As Ivan Krastev observes:

For us (Europeans), everything that is happening is post-Cold War. For the rest of the world it is very much post-colonialism. Turkey and Russia, for example – they were empires, but because they were peripheral empires they have imperialism and at the same time a feeling that they themselves have been colonised by the West. As a result we have a different idea of what is going on in Ukraine. We see the Ukrainians' struggle for independence. They got formal independence in 1991, but it was simply the decision of the Soviet elite who moved to gain control over the assets for themselves. People who voted were not sure what they

wanted and who they were. And now they want to be truly independent and sovereign[1].

With this publication the Institute of Central Europe (Instytut Europy Środkowej, IEŚ) in Lublin contributes to a broader scholarly discussion on the fall of the Soviet Union and its international repercussions, providing different Western perspectives on the situation in 1991 and across the years that followed. This IEŚ Policy Paper is the result of collaboration between the Institute of Central Europe in Lublin and academics from American and British universities, including Harvard University (Mark Kramer, Serhii Plokhy, and Thomas F. Remington), the University of California, Riverside (Paul D'Anieri), and the University of Birmingham (Kataryna Wolczuk). We want to extend our special thanks to the authors for their analysis of the fall of the USSR and how we can interpret the longitudinal resonances of this profound geopolitical change. We hope that this special issue of the IEŚ Policy Papers will be well received by readers and will encourage experts who study the Soviet Union and post-Soviet politics to continue their research.

George Soroka, Tomasz Stępniewski
Cambridge and Lublin, December 2021

[1] I. Krastev, *Speaking Tough on Russia is Not Enough (interviewer: Matthew Luxmoore)*, "New Eastern Europe", 30 June 2015, http://www.neweasterneurope.eu/interviews/1639-speaking-tough-on-russia-is-not-enough.

Mark Kramer

1981 – 1991 – 2021: A Retrospective on Martial Law in Poland and the End of the USSR

This month has witnessed commemorations of the fortieth anniversary of the imposition of martial law in Poland in December 1981 and the thirtieth anniversary of the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991. Those two events marked the beginning and the end of the final decade of the Cold War. Juxtaposing the two anniversaries helps us understand the enormous changes that can happen in international relations in a brief period of time.

In December 1981, after General Wojciech Jaruzelski launched a military crackdown in Poland, the political outlook in that country and the rest of the Soviet bloc was grim. Polish security forces, backed by the Polish army, swiftly crushed the free trade union Solidarność, which had been functioning since the late summer of 1980 as a de facto alternative center of power in Poland. Overnight, sixteen

months of nascent democratization in Poland under Solidarność came to a decisive end.

In other Warsaw Pact countries as well, Communist dictators stepped up the use of force and repression throughout the early 1980s. The ruling Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) ordered the Soviet State Security Committee (KGB) to subdue the small dissident movement in the USSR, which had been seeking improvements in human rights. By the end of 1981, every prominent figure in the Soviet dissident movement had been either imprisoned or forced into exile. The KGB violently disbanded the Moscow Helsinki Group, which had been set up to monitor Soviet compliance with humanitarian provisions of the Helsinki Final Act signed by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in mid-1975. Over the next few years, the KGB and the CPSU Propaganda Department clamped down severely on anyone in the mass media, academia, or other professions who expressed even the slightest deviation from official views.

Much the same was true in all East European countries allied with the USSR. The state security organs in those countries worked closely with the Soviet KGB to establish tight social control and get rid of small numbers of dissidents who advocated human rights and democratization. Especially harsh were the restrictions imposed by Communist authorities in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Romania, where even minuscule hints of dissent incurred a wrathful and overwhelming response.

By the early 1980s, any concerns the Soviet and East European governments had about the small dissident movements in their countries had been alleviated. Orthodox

Communist rule was firmly in place in every Warsaw Pact country, and Western groups that had been pushing for improvements in human rights in the Soviet bloc through the CSCE process had essentially lost all hope.

The martial law crackdown in Poland in December 1981 not only signalled a new phase of domestic repression but also came amid a sharp escalation of the Cold War. A decade earlier, U.S.-Soviet relations had undergone significant but short-lived improvements with the détente policies adopted by U.S. President Richard Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. But tensions began resurfacing in the latter half of the 1970s, and by the end of the decade, when Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan, the relationship had broken down altogether. U.S.-Soviet ties continued to deteriorate after Ronald Reagan was elected U.S. President in November 1980. By then, acrimony and hostility pervaded every aspect of superpower relations.

Many experts in the West were worried at the time how events would develop. Robert Gilpin, a distinguished scholar of international relations (IR) theory at Princeton University, wrote pessimistically in the 1981 edition of his classic text *War and Change in World Politics* about what he saw as the steady decline of the United States and the likely ascendance of the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact countries:

> Although the United States continues to be the dominant and most prestigious state in the [international] system, it no longer has the power to "govern" the system as it did in the past. [...] The classic symptoms of a declining power characterize the United States in the early 1980s. [...] The Soviet Union is, of course, the rising challenger, and it appears to be the one power

> that in the years to come could supplant the American dominance over the international system. [...] [T]he acceleration in the development of Soviet industrial and military might in recent decades has been formidable. [...] Meanwhile, the relative decline in American power and the continuing restraint [in Washington] on the use of military force has [sic] given rise to an era of uneasy coexistence between the superpowers. [...] The redistribution of military power in favor of [the USSR] as the rising state in the international system [...] might precipitate a course of events over which [the superpowers] could lose control.

Gilpin, a leading proponent of the realist school of IR theory, was hardly the only commentator at the time who expressed deep misgivings about U.S. foreign policy, the projected rise of the Soviet Union, and the future of the Cold War. The successful imposition of martial law in Poland, the ongoing wave of repression in other Soviet-bloc countries, the gains achieved by Soviet military forces in distant Third World countries, and the comprehensive Soviet military buildup were repeatedly cited by Western commentators who worried that the Cold War might be taking an ominous turn.

The rapid succession of leadership changes in the CPSU starting with Brezhnev's death in November 1982 gave further reason for pessimism. Brezhnev was replaced by Yurii Andropov, the long-time head of the KGB, whose tenure as General Secretary of the CPSU was notable for intensified repression at home and hardline policies abroad. But Andropov died of kidney failure in February 1984 and was re-

placed by a Brezhnev protégé, Konstantin Chernenko, whose 13-month tenure in office was mostly a holding pattern.

U.S.-Soviet relations throughout this period remained tense. By the time Reagan's first term as U.S. president ended in January 1985, he had not been able to meet with any of the three men who had headed the CPSU during that time. The outlook overall for the Soviet bloc and the Cold War at the start of Reagan's second term appeared bleak.

Yet, just a few years later, the Cold War ended, and by late December 1991, the Soviet Union had disappeared as well. The world of December 1981, which had seemed so disheartening for supporters of human rights, democracy, and freedom, had changed fundamentally for the better within just a decade.

This astounding transformation in the latter half of the 1980s and early 1990s began in March 1985, when Chernenko died and was replaced by Mikhail Gorbachev, who had just barely edged out one of Brezhnev's closest acolytes, Viktor Grishin, for the top party job. Gorbachev's policies during his first two years in office departed relatively little from orthodox measures and were modest in achievements, but already during this early period, it was clear that the new Soviet leader wanted to inject greater dynamism into Soviet politics, to revitalize the Soviet economy, and to strengthen his country's role as a global superpower. In November 1985, he met with Reagan in Geneva, the first time when the U.S. and Soviet leaders had convened since Brezhnev and Jimmy Carter held a summit in Vienna in June 1979.

Although Gorbachev's initial policy agenda was not oriented toward radical change, he soon came to believe that unless he embarked on a much more far-reaching set of po-

litical and economic reforms he would run up against many of the same obstacles that had thwarted earlier attempts to reinvigorate the Soviet economy and enhance the Soviet Union's global position. He set aside his policies of *uskorenie* (acceleration) and shifted to a much bolder program of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (official openness). By the latter half of 1988 and 1989, Gorbachev embraced a truly radical agenda, transforming the Soviet Union in a remarkably short time. Competitive elections, public protest movements, free-wheeling discussions in the mass media, ethnic assertiveness, and other features of political life that had been strictly forbidden in the USSR under previous leaders suddenly became *de rigueur* in the Gorbachev era.

In addition to transforming the Soviet polity and setting it on the course of democratization, Gorbachev undertook dramatic changes in Soviet foreign policy. Having concluded that a highly militarized approach to foreign policy would be incompatible with the ambitious reforms he wanted to adopt at home, he sought to overcome the Cold War. Gorbachev met several times more with Reagan and with Reagan's successor, George H.W. Bush, and signed far-reaching nuclear arms control treaties. Nuclear arsenals were reduced, and the Cold War rapidly abated.

Even more important, Gorbachev persuaded the CPSU Politburo to adopt a radically new approach toward the East European countries, forswearing the role the Soviet Union had long played in upholding Communist dictatorships in the region. In March 1989 the Soviet Politburo secretly decided it would no longer use force to maintain Communist rule in Eastern Europe. In subsequent months, this decision was put to the test, and in each case the Soviet authorities

accepted the downfall of Communist regimes. The peaceful end of Communist rule in Eastern Europe – apart from the violent overthrow of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime in Romania – seemed wholly unrealistic when Gorbachev took office, but his decision to embrace fundamental changes in Soviet foreign policy allowed this once-implausible scenario to materialize. With the disappearance of Soviet-backed Communist regimes in Eastern Europe came the end of the division of Europe, and this in turn brought an end to the Cold War. Within just four years, the new Soviet leader achieved the remarkable feat of ushering in transformative, peaceful change for the better.

Despite all of Gorbachev's achievements both at home and abroad, the forces he unleashed within the Soviet Union increasingly eluded his control. Political rivals outside the CPSU, who could take advantage of the greatly expanded political opportunity structure under Gorbachev, moved ahead in pursuit of their own objectives and thereby complicated the central authorities' efforts to keep the Soviet Union together. The onset of a severe economic crisis in the Soviet Union in 1990-1991 – a crisis that resulted from Gorbachev's own policies and from a sharp drop in global oil prices that deprived the USSR of much-needed hard-currency revenue – caused a further deterioration of the central authorities' control.

The political fissures that increasingly came to the fore in 1991 inspired an attempt by hardliners in Moscow to launch a coup in August 1991, but the attempt proved abortive. The rapid collapse of the attempted coup severely enervated all of the longstanding Soviet political institutions and largely undermined last-ditch efforts to keep the Soviet Union

intact. The rebuff of the coup gave a powerful fillip to the independence movement in Ukraine, resulting in a decisive vote for independence in a referendum held on 1 December 1991. The push for independence in Ukraine caused the president of the Russian Republic, Boris Yeltsin, to realize it was no longer tenable to preserve a union, and he arranged a meeting with his Ukrainian and Belarusian counterparts in Belovezhskaya Pushcha on 7-8 December 1991 to sign accords dissolving the Soviet Union. Until then, Gorbachev had still been hoping he could maintain a Soviet state, but in the aftermath of the Belovezhskaya Pushcha meeting and another meeting in Kazakhstan two weeks later that officially set up the Commonwealth of Independent States, Gorbachev faced up to reality. He resigned all his offices on 25 December 1991, and the next day the upper chamber of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR formally approved the dissolution of the country, bringing an end to the state the Bolsheviks had created after coming to power in November 1917.

Looking back at these events from the perspective of 30 years, we cannot really compare the extraordinary process of change in the USSR, Eastern Europe, and the Cold War in 1985-1991 with anything that has happened since 1991. The inauspicious outlook after the martial-law crackdown in Poland in December 1981 conveyed a sense of permanence about the Cold War and about the future of Communist autocracies, but just a decade later the situation had been totally altered. Gorbachev deserves most of the credit (or blame, depending on one's point of view) for this transformation, but others, including Reagan, Bush, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and ordinary citizens in Poland,

Hungary, and other East European countries, also played important roles.

In the years since the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, most of the former Soviet republics have either remained under the authoritarian rule or reverted to it. The Russian Federation briefly embarked on democratization, but movement in that direction petered out in the early 1990s. Since then, Russia has experienced upheavals, wars, unrest, and a return to autocracy under Vladimir Putin. Many Russians nowadays look back nostalgically on the Soviet past, conveniently glossing over the repression, lack of freedom, and miserable standards of living. Putin himself has spoken proudly about his sixteen years of work for the KGB and has lamented the demise of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [20th] century" – a jarring assessment, to say the least.

In the West, memories of the Soviet era are far soberer and are devoid of nostalgia about a mythical past. In North America and Europe, commemorations of the 30th anniversary of the end of the Soviet Union have highlighted the tyranny that preceded Gorbachev's rise to power. In Russia, the favourability ratings for Gorbachev are extremely low, but in the West, he is widely (and appropriately) admired. Many events in Western countries marking the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the Soviet Union have depicted him as a great leader. At some point, after a few more generations have passed and Putin is no longer on the scene, Gorbachev might finally earn a more favourable reputation in Russia for having brought freedom to the USSR. After 1991, attempts to develop full-fledged democracy in the Russian Federation did not pan out, but that was certainly not Gorbachev's fault.

The final decade of the Cold War, starting with martial law in Poland and ending with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, is worth bearing in mind today and in the future. Over the past three decades, the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia have experienced numerous setbacks and disappointments. The challenges and threats of the 21st century have been daunting and are likely to remain so. Nonetheless, a review of the decade from December 1981 to December 1991 reminds us that even when events and problems come along that seem dire and insoluble, circumstances can improve more rapidly than we expect. Both now and in the future, we should always be on the lookout for opportunities to remedy exigent problems and to change the world for the better.

Serhii Plokhy

The Return of the Cold War

When the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, one of the most encouraging features of its collapse was the absence of large-scale wars between the republics. The scenario that concerned many in the West, "Yugoslavia with nukes", never materialized.

The presence of nuclear weapons on Soviet territory should be credited not only with the peaceful end of the Cold War but also with the relatively peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union, where four republics, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, found themselves in possession, although not always in control, of nuclear weapons. The United States worked hand in hand with Russia to bring about nuclear disarmament, forcing Ukraine and the other republics to give up their nuclear weapons in exchange for security assurances. These turned out to be worthless when Russia invaded Ukraine in the spring of 2014.

The 1990s marked the high point of Russo-American cooperation. The two countries reached an agreement on a number of key issues, from further cuts to nuclear arsenals

to the resolution of regional conflicts in Africa, the Middle East, and Afghanistan, where Moscow stopped supporting its client states. But there was one major exception: Russia and the United States never reached an understanding about the future of the post-Soviet space.

Despite his decision in December 1991 to allow the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Yeltsin never envisioned the post-Soviet space as an area in which the former republics of the USSR would acquire a free hand in deciding their affairs. The Commonwealth of Independent States, formed in December 1991, was there among other things to ensure Russia's leading role in the region. Other republics, Ukraine in particular, regarded the Commonwealth as an international institution that would allow the orderly dissolution of the Union or, as they called it in Kyiv, a "civilized divorce".

The United States remained a strong supporter of Gorbachev and the Soviet Union until the last weeks of the Union's existence, but once the USSR was gone, Washington endorsed the full independence of the post-Soviet states as opposed to the limited sovereignty advocated for them by Yeltsin and his advisers. The conflict between these two visions came to the forefront at the start of the 21st century.

Ukraine found itself at the very center of the battle for full sovereignty of the republics. It never fully joined the Commonwealth, which it had helped to create, and with the departure of former party officials from the political scene, pro-democratic forces made a push to reorient Ukraine toward the West. The Orange Revolution – mass protests in Kyiv in the fall of 2004 triggered by the government's attempt to rig elections in favor of a presidential candidate supported by Russia – put membership of the European

Union on Ukraine's political agenda. The United States supported Ukraine's democratic choice, but Russia considered the Orange Revolution as a form of American aggression and encroachment on its sphere of influence.

While Putin's liberal allies, such as Anatoly Chubais, advocated the formation of a Russian liberal empire in which the other republics would be linked to Russia by economic dependence and soft power, Putin concluded that his only effective instrument to keep the post-Soviet space under Russian control was the use of military force. In the first months of 2014, as Ukrainians revolted against their president, Viktor Yanukovych, who had promised to sign an association agreement with the European Union but reneged under pressure from Russia, Putin sent his troops into Ukraine's Crimea and seized the peninsula. A few months later, he opened another front in his war on Ukraine, this time in the eastern industrial region of the Donbas.

The war that began there in the spring and early summer of 2014 is still ongoing, has claimed the lives of more than 14,000 people, with at least twice as many wounded, left hundreds of thousands without shelter, and forced millions to become refugees. What are Russia's motives? First, to arrest Ukraine's drift toward the West: Putin claimed that if he had not annexed the peninsula, it would have become a launching pad for NATO forces. Second, to undermine and discredit Ukrainian democracy, whose success would send an undesirable signal to the Russians: if Ukraine can be democratic and successful, why cannot Russia follow suit?

Moscow's efforts to establish or retain a Russian sphere of influence are not limited to Ukraine. The same rationale is apparent in neighboring Belarus, where Russia supports

the highly unpopular president Aliaksandr Lukashenka, whose legitimacy is not recognized by the country's European neighbors. The western front of Russia's confrontation with the collective West also includes the Baltic states, the post-Soviet success story. They joined both the European Union and NATO, but Russia considers them contested territory and is using new methods of cyber warfare against its former subjects.

Further south, Russia maintains its military and economic support of Transnistria, a diplomatically unrecognized enclave created in Moldova to keep that country's Western aspirations in check. In the Caucasus, Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 and took over the region of South Ossetia, adding it to another Georgian enclave already under Russian control, the Republic of Abkhazia. The war was a direct response to Georgia's desire to join NATO.

Many observers speak of a return of the Cold War to the now redefined Eastern Europe, consisting of the former Soviet republics of the USSR's western and, in part, southern periphery. But in reality, the new Cold War started there as soon as the original one was over. What is truly unprecedented in the developments of the last decade is the emergence of new international actors in the post-Soviet space. The recent resumption of the military conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the contested area of Nagorno-Karabakh ended with Azerbaijan's victory, thanks in large part to the backing of its ally, Turkey. Russia brought its "peacekeepers" into the area but was constrained to accept the defeat of its client, Armenia.

The whole region is emerging as a new battleground of a different Cold War, that between the United States and Chi-

na, in which Moscow figures as a junior partner of Beijing – a return to the old Sino-Soviet alliance, with the partners' roles reversed. China, which is extending its economic and political influence in Central Asia and beyond (it is Ukraine's largest trading partner), refrains from challenging Russia directly in those areas, but its growing economic power, as opposed to Russia's stagnant economy, leaves little doubt about the eventual winner of that contest.

Thomas F. Remington

Was a Reformed Soviet State Viable?

Historians will long debate whether a reformed Soviet state could have avoided collapse. If Gorbachev had fully carried out *perestroika* or had he never undertaken reform at all, could the USSR have been preserved? Could a democratized, social-democratic regime have replaced communist rule? Alternatively, could the state have maintained itself under communist rule, for example, by reforming its economy and only much later reforming its political system; or could it have survived as a new tsarist imperial autocracy? These questions may be impossible to answer with certainty; however, like other great historical counterfactuals, they invite retrospective consideration of the forces that did lead to the breakup of the state. Such an analysis holds lessons for our understanding of contemporary political regimes such as for the topical question of the resilience of the contemporary communist regime in China.

In this essay, I offer a few thoughts about these questions. I base my analysis on a long study of the rise and operation of

the Soviet regime and considerable on-the-ground research in Russia during the years of transition. My personal view is that the Soviet state was not viable. Any meaningful effort at reform would have produced forces leading to the breakup of the state along the fissure lines established in the constitutional structure of the state as a federation of republics, organized around ethnic nationalities. There simply was not enough associational life outside the state to provide cohesion across the entire country, nor was there a system of market exchange that would have underpinned such organizational infrastructure. A strong state, in the end, depends on a strong civil society, which in turn depends on a system of economic exchange. The highly centralized planned economy of the Soviet regime, essential to maintain the communist party's monopoly on power, had suppressed nearly all forms of legal market activity (while the illegal market exchange was largely parasitical on the administered economy) and, with it, any capacity for the broad social interests of workers, employers, peasants, professionals, or regions to articulate and aggregate interests across the entire span of the union. In brief, without a communist party devoted to maintaining the institutional sinews of state power, there were too few alternative sources of authority with a stake in preserving the Soviet state. Soviet statehood was too closely bound up with communist party rule to have allowed a competitive party system to succeed it. Whether a tsar could have restored an imperial autocracy remains an open question, but the degree to which national self-awareness and populist demands strived for something approaching a "normal" standard of living makes such an eventuality highly unlikely. Let me outline my thinking on these points.

It is often held that Yeltsin's ambition thwarted Gorbachev's efforts to carry out partial economic reforms. Certainly, the two differed sharply in leadership style, and their rivalry was intense. One of the great historical might-have-beens, therefore, is whether an understanding between them over their respective powers in a reformed union might have allowed the union to carry on, perhaps, in some form, along the lines of the Novo-Ogarevo 9+1 agreement of April 1991. Some speculated at the time that the role of the Soviet president could have become equivalent to that of the president in a loose federation or confederation, becoming a kind of Soviet queen of England. This line of thinking runs contrary to the economic realities of the country, which became manifest after the union did break up, for several reasons.

First, consider the monetary system. The ability of the successor states to issue credit freely created huge inflationary pressure on an economy already beset by widespread supply breakdowns. Therefore, if a central union government had preserved sovereignty over money and credit, it would necessarily have had to control fiscal policy in the republics as well. Most republics, after all, depended on the fiscal transfers provided by the more resource-abundant republics – especially the RSFSR – to maintain current operations. Because the net material balance flowed from the Russian republic to the other republics, rather than the other way round (notwithstanding the universal conviction in every republic that it was being exploited by the union), the same logic of redistributive conflict would have erupted as it did in Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, with the same tensions expressed as ethnic resentments and nationalist movements.

Consider likewise the role of the CPSU. A decisive blow to Gorbachev's political control was the formation of the communist party organization for the Russian Republic in 1990. Its driving ideology was a kind of traditional Russian nationalism cum Stalinism, and since it could hardly embrace a liberalized version of communist doctrine; the rigid and reactionary orientation of the Russian communist party, with the undying Gennady Zyuganov as its leader for more than thirty years now, defined it from the start. The USSR created the formal attributes of statehood in all the other republics except for the Russian republic: the RSFSR lacked not only its own communist party but also an Academy of Sciences, a KGB, a foreign ministry. Russians were the *Staatsvolk* of the Soviet Union, much as Serbs were for Yugoslavia. Coupled with the deep mutual resentments between Russians and popular movements in other republics that spilled out under glasnost', it is difficult to imagine any political arrangement that could have reconciled Russian aspirations to dominate a reformed union with non-Russian aspirations to break free of Russian imperial power. The political reality was that a strong Russia made the USSR superfluous while a strong USSR made Russian autonomy impossible.

For these reasons, Yeltsin's personal qualities as a leader matter less than the strategic logic of his position. To win elective office in a partially democratized political arena, as Yeltsin did, convincingly, with three large popular majorities in three successive years, Yeltsin had to appeal simultaneously to populist anti-establishment, democratic, and bureaucratic nationalist sentiments. So long as Yeltsin could mobilize these forces to oppose the Soviet center,

he embodied the aspirations of large majorities of people within the Russian republic. At the point he himself became president of the republic, he had to reconcile them in a governing strategy. At that, of course, he was far less successful. He was nearly impeached and removed in 1993 and again in 1999, resorting to force to suppress a violent opposition movement in October 1993, and ultimately resigning office at the end of 1999. The incompatibility of a democratic political system with the imperative of maintaining Russian statehood became clear over Putin's long tenure in office. Much as we would like to impute high importance to personality, and to suppose that political leaders have a greater range of plausible policy alternatives than they do, what matters is the actual setting in which they formulate their strategies for gaining and exercising power.

Did China avert a collapse by avoiding the Soviet model? Certainly, Xi Jinping believes it did. The rapid collapse of the Soviet Union still haunts Xi and his comrades. As Xi poignantly asked soon after taking power as general secretary in fall 2012, "Why did the Soviet Union disintegrate? Why did the Soviet Communist Party collapse? An important reason was that their ideals and convictions wavered. Finally, all it took was one quiet word from Gorbachev to declare the dissolution of the Soviet Communist Party, and a great party was gone. In the end, nobody was a real man, nobody came out to resist"[1]. China's shock at the demise of the USSR following ineffectual efforts at reform continues to reinforce Xi's determination to maintain absolute control over the

[1] Ch. Buckley, *Vows of Change in China Belie Private Warning*, "New York Times", 14 February 2013.

state, society, and the economy; to avoid liberalization or ideological pluralization, and indeed to intensify Marxist political indoctrination and communications. Many observers believe that the Chinese political regime is resilient in ways that the Soviet regime never was, partly owing to its revolutionary heritage of guerrilla war and tactical flexibility, and to the fact that it is not organized along ethno-federal lines[2]. They point to the fact that all three of the communist states organized as ethnic federations, the USSR, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslavia, disintegrated along the lines defined by their constitutional setups. All the other states where communist rule gave way to another regime type still maintained their integrity of states – excepting of course those that faced civil wars along ethnic and regional lines.

Likewise, many believe that Gorbachev sequenced reform incorrectly; had he begun with economic liberalization, they hold, and postponed democratization, he could have reformed the economy and preserved the state[3]. This logic rests on a faulty premise, i.e., that Gorbachev had viable policy choices. It is usually forgotten that Gorbachev

[2] *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China*, ed. by S. Heilmann and E.J. Perry, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011; *Why Communism Did Not Collapse: Understanding Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Asia and Europe*, ed. by M.K. Dimitrov, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

[3] S. Shirk, *The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993; M. Pei, *China's Trapped Transition*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008; Y. Qian, G. Roland, Ch. Xu, *The Process of China's Market Transition (1978-1998): The Evolutionary, Historical, and Comparative Perspectives*, "Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics", 156:1, 2000, pp. 151-171; M. Harrison, D. Ma, *Soaring Dragon, Stumbling Bear: China's Rise in a Comparative Context*, CAGE-Chatham House Series, Warwick, UK: Centre for Comparative Advantage in the Global Economy, 2013; D. Yang, *Remaking the Chinese Leviathan: Market Transition and the Politics of Governance in China*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004; Ch. Xu, *The Fundamental Institutions of China's Reforms and Development*, "Journal of Economic Literature", 49, 2011, pp. 1076-1151.

did in fact begin with economic reform, taking the Chinese reforms as a model. It was precisely because they failed abysmally that he attempted to mobilize popular political pressure through democratization as a way of forcing the immobile state bureaucracy to accept economic liberalization. Moreover, in Russia, the obstacles to market reform were even steeper than in other communist countries, including China. Stalin's economic growth model sought economies of scale by concentrating the production of particular goods in large-scale enterprises. China had never achieved the level of centralization that the Soviet economy did and had grown far more regionally decentralized by the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution. Upon assuming office as deputy prime minister and chief policy architect in Russia following the union's dissolution, Egor Gaidar was astonished to learn of the extent to which Gorbachev's reforms had brought about the near-total dissipation of state capacity[4]. How severely circumscribed were the limits of actual control on the part of the central government became evident as the consequences of the "shock therapy" initiative unfolded: enterprises resisted any meaningful market restructuring, instead of entering into barter arrangements and using their regional and federal contacts to win procurement contracts and subsidized credits. The rapid recovery from the August 1999 collapse of the currency – the speed of which caught the IMF by surprise[5] – was again due to the fact that Moscow had very little understanding of or control over decisions made

4 Ye. Gaidar, *Days of Defeat and Victory*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2012.
5 M. Gilman, M. Camdessus, *No Precedent, No Plan: Inside Russia's 1998 Default*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010.

by enterprise heads and regional leaders as they worked to maintain basic social order. Once again, we must reckon with the strategic setting in which leaders make policy choices rather than thinking that they can create the conditions in which their reforms will operate.

Nor is it at all clear that China's communist regime is in fact resilient. As hidden debt accumulates as a result of over-investment in infrastructure projects in China and abroad (particularly as part of the Belt and Road Initiative), and local off-book investment funds accumulate unredeemable obligations, attracting investors by the implicit expectation that they are backed by the government, the structural distortions embedded in China's growth model are becoming increasingly apparent[6]. But major reform of the financial system would upset the delicate balance of compromises the regime must make to retain power, i.e., between the monopoly of an ideologically-driven communist party and its dependence on an economy dominated by politically favored state and private companies that feed the regime with taxes, kickbacks, and privileged ownership shares. The leaders dare not move too far toward policies that would seriously harm the interests of the richest strata of entrepreneurs and managers, who have locked in their advantageous positions by cultivating the favor of politicians at the local and national levels. As in the USSR, in a polity where ideology and power are intertwined, the deepening contradiction between the doctrines of the regime and the

[6] *Hidden local debt is now equivalent to over half of GDP and is larger even than the total amount of official government debt*, Bloomberg, 29 September 2021, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-09-29/china-hidden-local-government-debt-is-half-of-gdp-goldman-say.

actual institutions and practices of its power results in a gulf no amount of central control can bridge.

Could the USSR have become a well-ordered enlightened absolutist state, along the lines of 18th century Prussia? In 1807, a prominent Prussian statesman named Freiherr vom Stein drafted a memorandum for the emperor outlining a series of reforms he considered urgently necessary for the future of the state. Reflecting the widely-felt sense of trauma over Prussia's defeat at the hands of Napoleon, Stein argued that a strong state-required strong consultative and participatory institutions and strong local self-government. The ultimate goal of reform was "the arousal of public-spiritedness, the application of dormant or misdirected forces and knowledge, harmony between the spirit of the nation, its views and requirements and those of the state authorities, the re-awakening of the feelings of independence and national honor"[7]. Influenced by Enlightenment ideas, he argued that property owners should have a greater direct role in governance and that the state should rely less on its paid bureaucrats and more on corporate forms of representation of social estates.

Could some sort of 18th century ideal of enlightened absolutism – a contemporary version of Catherine the Great's reforms – have offered a viable path for preserving the USSR? To ask the question is to answer it. As in Catherine's day, Rus-

[7] "…die Belebung des Gemeingeistes und Bürgersinns, die Bedeutung der schlafenden oder falsch geleiteten Kräfte und der zerstreut liegenden Kenntnisse, der Einklang zwischen dem Geist der Nation, ihren Ansichten und Bedürfnissen und denen der Staatsbehörden, die Wiederbelebung der Gefühle für Vaterland, Selbständigkeit und Nationalehre." Nassauer Denkschrift of 1807, in Freiherr vom Stein, *Brief und Amtliche Schriften*, zweiter Band, erster Teil, ed. by P.G. Thielen (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1964), p. 394.

sia lacked and still lacks a competent, honest, and professional bureaucracy or system of organized social estates. The desire to lead lives similar to their counterparts in European metropolitan centers has long since awakened among the younger, urban population, while the economy has grown more dependent over time on the extraction of natural resources. Among the wealthy, the diversion of wealth into offshore accounts, luxury real estate, and other assets outside the control of the authorities has deprived Russia of most investment capital except that which the state can mobilize through its growing control of the economy. Enlightenment ideals are further from penetrating Russia than ever, whereas 21st century communications technologies enable a privileged stratum of Russians to escape the bonds of time and space rather than to contribute to the country's collective well-being.

I conclude, therefore, that Soviet leaders lacked the means to reform the regime in any way that could have preserved the Soviet state.

Kataryna Wolczuk

Final Post-Soviet Legacies: 30 Years since the Collapse of the USSR

During the Cold War, the USSR was viewed with a mix of awe and fear: awe owing to its immense capacity to catch up socio-economically and militarily, but fear about how this capacity could be exploited against the west. It was only after its collapse that the true capacity of the USSR was revealed.

Throughout its existence, the Soviet Union was scrutinised extensively, but this scrutiny was often informed by the theoretical, ideological and normative debates in and about the West itself. It was widely held that the Soviet regime created a modern, educated, industrialised society (with the partial exception of Central Asian republics). As scientific, technological, industrial, and secular processes underpinned Soviet social development, the Soviet Union was often conceptualised in the West as featuring the characteristics of modern statehood (Jowitt, 1983). There was thus a widely held belief that the Soviet state – with its elaborate political and legal organisational

structures – was evolving into polity approximating Weberian "legal-rational domination". As such, it was held that the Soviet political system would eventually align with its modern society.

The reality proved to be anything but. Following the collapse of the USSR it was soon clear that the USSR's system of governance was a house of cards: the speed with which its structures collapsed exposed its extreme fragility. From its ruins emerged fifteen apparently modern, but actually mis-developed, states. Not one of them possessed the functional capacity or the expertise to develop and implement public policies in order to address the manifest legacies of Soviet rule, such as technological backwardness, environment decay, energy inefficiency and various deformations as evidenced in maladapted institutions, pervasive corruption, rapid economic decline and impoverishment.

Thirty years on, while there has been progress, weak state capacity, corruption, and uneven socio-economic modernisation remain impediments to progress and stability for all post-Soviet states, including Russia. As Torbakov observed, from a historical perspective, the disintegration of the USSR is a drawn-out process: "True, the Soviet Union as a state… did indeed disappear overnight, but in the fledgling post-Soviet states, the decomposition of Soviet institutions, practices, and mental frames have taken decades, and the process is still going on". Against this background, it is worth re-examining some of the more pernicious aspects of soviet mis-development with regard to weak state capacity and legal nihilism.

From the Soviet superpower to... weak statehood

Perhaps the most striking legacy of this former superpower is the weakness of state capacity, namely the state's ability to implement the policies of the state's choosing.

In the Soviet era, the governing structures were bifurcated: both state and party structures existed at every level of governance. The fusion of party and state enabled the creation of a centrally planned economy with the capacity to promote rapid socio-economic modernisation and to deliver a wide-range of public services, from kindergartens to a country-wide scheme for graduate job placement. Of all the aspects of the USSR, the command economy and party were studied most often. This is hardly surprising: given that all state institutions were guided and overseen by the party, it was the latter which attracted most attention. It was only once the Soviet system crumbled and the power of the Party had dissipated, that the phenomenal mis-development of the states which emerged from the Soviet Union became apparent.

Under the Soviet Union, due to a split in executive functions, the responsibility for policy formation, deliberation on policy alternatives, arbitration between competing priorities and interests was vested in the communist party. The duties of central state bodies, namely the council of ministers, ministries and other central state bodies, were essentially administrative. Thus, formally, the council of ministers and its apparatus became the government, though it lacked the essential policy-making capacity characterising the governments in the West.

But following the demise of the communist system, the newly independent states faced two major problems: administrations were under-politicised in terms of policymaking capacity and yet over-politicised in terms of personnel policy, particularly the civil service (Goetz and Wollmann, 2001). These two characteristics were and remain evident in all post-Soviet countries. Therefore, even though the newly independent republics converted their councils of ministers and Supreme Soviets into the cabinets of ministers and parliaments, respectively, these institutions did not have the political experience and functional capacity to perform the range of functions they were mandated by the newly forged constitutions. The cabinets of ministers consisted essentially of individual ministers with no collective sense of responsibility for policy deliberation and development – they could not function as a united political body to guide the countries through the tumultuous process of disintegration and change. And while the inherited Soviet bureaucratic structures experienced an institutional breakdown, they were not replaced by a developed civil service system with sufficient well-trained, motivated and remunerated personnel. Government ministries were "hollow" in that many government functions, departments, and divisions existed but they lacked the functional capacity to develop and/or implement public policies. Overall, the net result has been a bloated yet ineffective bureaucracy with no strategic leadership and yet capable of strangling any initiatives through multiple administrative bottlenecks.

Legal Nihilism

Another powerful and lasting Soviet legacy is something which may be most aptly referred to as legal nihilism (Browning, 2009). The post-Soviet countries, including Russia, are nominally well endowed in terms of laws and bodies to adopt, implement and uphold them. They are equally well provided for in terms of legal professionals – they have legal scholars, trained lawyers, law graduates, and thousands of judges in an extensive system of general and specialist courts.

Yet, the fact that the law fails to function as it should in these countries is due to its exploitation by the ruling elites, public officials and the legal profession itself. Despite the appearance of a modern legal system, being in power gives the rulers control of the legal system for advancing their interests and suppressing political opponents. In Russia, the concept of "thief in law" (*vor v zakone*) captures the legal impunity which the legal system provides for public officials and businesses with political connections.

This Soviet-era legal nihilism stems from the way that the Soviet Union transplanted Germanic legal positivism, which prioritised the formal-dogmatic method and glossed over the ethical, political and economic underpinnings and applications of law. German positivism spawned the idea of *Rechtsstaat*, in which legality was interpreted as adherence to the formally adopted law, which fulfilled the criteria of procedural legitimacy. This procedural legitimacy was delivered using a rubber-stamp by Supreme Soviets and the legal apparatus in charge of overseeing "socialist legality".

In most post-Soviet countries, the judicial system displays servitude to the authorities. Legal reforms and or-

ganisational transplants have so far failed to overcome this legacy, such as the failure of constitutional courts, which were regarded as a pivotal innovation to restrain political elites and channel political disputes into legal processes. For example, in Ukraine, like in most post-Soviet countries, a constitutional court was created in the 1990s and equipped with broad powers to exercise constitutional review of political decisions and laws for the first time in Ukraine's history. Instead, it became an arena for conflict between political forces. Asked to adjudicate in political disputes, the Court found itself in a highly vulnerable position. Initially, the Court made procrastination and moderation a feature of its "survival strategy". The Court delayed adjudication in the most vexed political issues until the pressures to do so became overwhelming, at which point it carefully sought the middle ground. However, the ascendency of the presidency within 3-4 years of the inception of the constitutional court, curtailed its room for manoeuvre. By the early 2000s, the Court was only able to mitigate the worst excesses of the growing power of the presidency rather than challenge them. Since then, it has been unable to restore its legitimacy and independence. It has been said that, even if the Court has the constitutional guarantee of independence, "it has the wisdom not to use it".

Legal nihilism stems from the unwavering conviction of the rulers that as long as they are in power, they can use law in an instrumental way in order to perpetuate their rule: "rule by law" precedes "rule of law".

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The Soviet Union was uneven in terms of its achievements: it created modern societies but it failed to create modern states in a Weberian legal-rational sense. The pattern of mis-development hangs over the former Soviet republics and is usually captured by the categorisation "post-Soviet". However, it is also notable that post-Soviet leaders and/or societies have pursued different avenues to either capitalise on – or eradicate – Soviet legacies. This is most vividly illustrated in the Russia-Ukraine war: Ukraine's pursuit of closer ties with the EU as a pathway to modernisation (by concluding the Association Agreement) has triggered military aggression from Russia (Wolczuk, 2021). This means that even neighbouring countries, as with Russia and Ukraine, or Georgia and Azerbaijan, have less and less in common. These diverging patterns of political, economic and societal changes make "post-Soviet" an increasingly problematic common denominator. So, paradoxically, even though they continue to face some common problems and weaknesses, the increasing diversity of reform strategies and outcomes erodes the relevance and usefulness of the "post-Soviet" label.

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Paul D'Anieri

The International Legacy of the Collapse of the Soviet Union

The collapse of the Soviet Union dramatically redrew the map of Eurasia and the international politics of the region, and yet the change seemed much more dramatic after one, ten, or twenty years than it does now after thirty years. In many respects, and especially in the renewal of something that resembles the Cold War between Russia and the West, it seems like some patterns have endured or reemerged, even amidst the dramatic changes. This brief essay makes two points. First, the positions of the states in the regions today correspond closely with the positions each took towards the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990-1991. Second, the situation today is fundamentally different, for while the Soviet Union of 1990 was satisfied with the territorial status quo in the region, today's Russia is a revisionist power.

The Russian elite is and has been largely unified in an understanding of Russian national identity that has great power status at its center. This conception of Russian na-

tional identity is constructed both domestically and internationally. From the perspective of many Russian elites, the problem is not what Russia is doing today, but how the debacle of 1991 took place and how the damage can be undone.

Similarly, the aspirations of the other 14 constituent republics of the USSR have not changed dramatically since then. The states that were most assertive in leaving Moscow's orbit in 1991 are those that are most resistant to Russian hegemony today. Then as now, several of the entities that were Soviet republics and are now independent states could only be retained through force, while others were more willing to remain under Russian influence if given more autonomy for local elites to benefit from power.

In 1990, a year before the Soviet collapse, many of the 15 constituent republics of the USSR declared "sovereignty", which they saw not as secession from the Soviet Union or full independence, but rather as extensive autonomy within the Soviet Union, and as control of economic resources in particular. After the Baltic and Caucasus republics declared sovereignty, Russia was next, even before Ukraine. The Russians who pushed for a sovereignty declaration were interested in ending Soviet authoritarianism but not in ceding Russia's control of neighboring states or its role as a great power.

When Gorbachev held a referendum on revising the Union treaty in March 1991, six republics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, Armenia and Moldova) boycotted the vote. Gorbachev pursued a new "9+1" treaty with the remaining nine, but as the time to ratify it approached, there were two problems. First, two of the nine, Ukraine and Azerbaijan, sought greater autonomy than that envisioned in the treaty.

Second, Russian nationalists and Soviet revanchists opposed the treaty. With these two forces pulling in opposite directions, no compromise was possible. The speed with which Soviet internationalists became Russian nationalists may be seen as evidence that internationalism was always a façade.

In July 1991, weeks before the scheduled ratification, a group of political and cultural figures published a strongly worded condemnation of the proposed treaty in *Sovetskaya Rossiya*. The letter equated Russian nationalism with the preservation of the Soviet Union, asserting that increased autonomy of the republics constituted a sellout of the country to its foreign enemies. The signatories included Boris Gromov, who later served in the Russian Duma and as governor of Moscow Oblast; Valentin Varennikov, who was soon to be a leader of the coup against Gorbachev; Vasily Starodubtsev, another coup plotter who went on to be governor of Tula oblast from 1997 to 2005; and Gennady Zyuganov, who leads the Russian Communist Party and finished second to Boris Yeltsin in the 1996 Presidential election. The list of signatories is relevant because it shows the connection, even in 1991, of those who opposed the Soviet breakup and those who dominated politics in the post-Soviet era.

The pattern continued through the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in December 1991. Yeltsin's team sought to take over Soviet institutions but not to give up their control over the other republics. Ukraine, then as now, was seen as most vital, but resisted construction of new central institutions. While Ukraine sought to negotiate the loosest possible arrangements, others such as Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev feared being left out, and insisted that the new bloc be open to other post-Soviet

states. The Baltics and Georgia continued to stand aside, though Georgia later was compelled to join.

Thirty years on, the positions of the various states reflect their goals in 1990-91. The Baltics have left Russia for the EU and NATO. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have tried, but been held back by internal division, by Russian intervention and by EU/NATO ambivalence. Azerbaijan and Armenia have also been eager to move away, but have been constrained by their war with each other. Belarus and the five Central Asian republics were least interested then and are least interested now in breaking entirely free. Meanwhile, a core group of Russians, uniting hardline communists and Russian nationalists who had previously been enemies, cast the events of 1991 as a disaster for Russia as a great power. A majority of Russian citizens seem to prefer liberal democracy while endorsing Russian assertiveness, while Russia's elite seems to see liberal democracy as weakening Russia intolerably.

Like the Russian empire, the Soviet Union was an involuntary assembly of people. It collapsed because, under Gorbachev, the government lost some combination of the capability and the will to use force to retain control. Absent coercion, the republics (as well as Chechnya) sought more or less independence depending on their own ambitions. In the intervening thirty years, Russia has sought to undo the consequences of the event that Putin called a catastrophe. It has rebuilt both the ability and will to use force to regain territory lost in 1991. If one sought a monocausal explanation of the region's politics since 1991, it would focus on the collapse and reconstruction of Russian power. Russia's power has varied much more than its intentions.

Many western leaders and scholars saw the end of Soviet rule as providing an opportunity to forge a new cooperative relationship between the West and Russia, assuming that a liberal democratic government in Moscow would naturally see eye-to-eye on matters with the West, or would resolve disagreements peacefully, as posited by the enormously influential democratic peace theory.

But as Russian leaders stated emphatically to anyone who would listen, Russia was intent above all on remaining a "great power", with a veto over security affairs in Europe and with a sphere-of-influence in the "near abroad", though exactly what was meant by sphere of influence and where the "near abroad" ended has never been completely clear. Andrei Kozyrev's dramatic speech in Stockholm in December 1992 and his article in *Foreign Affairs* in the Summer of 1994 stated clearly that even "liberal" Russians insisted on this great power status. In this respect, Russia's insistence on being a great power, in opposition to the EU's rejection of great power politics, explains the sides' inability to transcend Cold War politics.

A crucial element of continuity is the role of security services in Russian politics. From their dominating role in the Stalin era, the role of the KGB and GRU had been pared back under Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and especially Gorbachev. The KGB was still ubiquitous at the end, but was less powerful politically. The failure of the coup in 1991 appeared to represent its final eclipse, as it neither prevented the coup nor implemented it successfully. Boris Yeltsin chose not to surrender this most valuable tool, thinking instead he could control it by splitting into two organizations, the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Foreign Intelligence Service

(SVR). Instead, the security services reconstituted themselves as the most effective organizations in Russia while the rest of the Soviet and Russian state – including parliament and courts – withered along with non-governmental organizations like the media.

To the extent the Cold War was a global competition, or a competition between communism and capitalism, it ended in 1991, if not in 1989. To the extent, the Cold War was about the division of Europe between democratic and non-democratic states, it took a brief pause in the early 1990s and then picked up again. In a strange way, Russian leaders came to agree with the West that a liberal democratic Russia would naturally accept Western norms and institutions. Therefore, retaining great power status required rejecting liberal democracy. This battle between the democratic and non-democratic parts of Europe defines the competition today. Every domestic crisis is an international crisis as well.

What does this mean for the present and future? All the signs point to the endurance of a Russian conception of itself that creates insecurity for Russia's neighbors and constant tensions with the West. But while this system seems stable, in discussing the Soviet collapse we should remember that almost none of us predicted it. The appearance of stability can be misleading, and many hope that a dramatic change will ensue when Putin finally passes from the scene. Even if domestic change does occur in Russia, one should wonder if a dramatic international change would follow. Putin's great power politics, his strident patriotism, and his mythologizing about Ukraine appear to be highly popular, even among those in Russia who loath the authoritarianism and corruption of the Russian government. We should, therefore,

expect Russia to keep searching for advantage, especially along and beyond its western border.

Ukraine appears destined to be the key line of contention, as it was in 1991 and as Berlin was during the Cold War. It is hard to know to what extent the Russian leaders are truly motivated by the mythologized history that sees Ukraine as an essential part of Russia, and to what extent that narrative is simply used as justification for actions sought on economic, geopolitical, and domestic grounds. After many years of feints and probes, Russia got the opportunity it was waiting for in 2014, when chaos in Kyiv reminiscent of that in Moscow in 1991 allowed Russia to seize Crimea and to intervene in Donbas. But a much bigger part of Ukraine successfully resisted the rebellions that Russia was instigating. Russia's willingness to use force has been limited. When the Donbas separatists were on the verge of defeat, Russia sent in its army, but it did not try to extend its invasion beyond the Donbas and Crimea. That left the line of contact where it is today.

How long will the contact line remain where it is today? That is the defining question of the post-2014 and it points toward instability. Putin has made his intention to subject Ukraine clear, despite wishful thinking among many in the West that Russia's actions since 2014 have somehow been defensive. If Russia seems satisfied with the current stalemate, it is almost certainly because it believes it can gain territory or concessions more cheaply in the future. Divisions in Ukraine, the West's desire to end the conflict, and increasing energy leverage all provide Russia reason to think that time is on its side.

Russia's western border has always been in flux, moving to the west or east depending on the distribution of power in the region. In this respect, the current situation is very different from that of the Cold War. Apart from the Baltic states, the post-1945 borders of the Soviet Union were accepted as legitimate internationally and by Russia, if not by many residents of the territories in question. The 1991 borders are regarded as legitimate internationally and by most residents of the new states, but not by Russia. Thus, while the collapse of the Soviet Union freed millions of people, ended a destructive global rivalry, and reduced the chances of nuclear holocaust, the post-Soviet region has lost stability over time as Russia's determination to reverse the changes of 1991 is fed by growth in power and an increased belief that time and *realpolitik* are on its side.

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On 25 December 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as president of the Soviet Union, bringing about the dissolution of the USSR. In 2021 we commemorated the 30th anniversary of this momentous occurrence, the legacies of which are still very much with us today.

With this publication the Institute of Central Europe (Instytut Europy Środkowej, IEŚ) in Lublin contributes to a broader scholarly discussion on the fall of the Soviet Union and its international repercussions, providing different Western perspectives on the situation in 1991 and across the years that followed. This IEŚ Policy Paper is the result of collaboration between the Institute of Central Europe in Lublin and academics from American and British universities, including Harvard University (Mark Kramer, Serhii Plokhy, and Thomas F. Remington), the University of California, Riverside (Paul D'Anieri), and the University of Birmingham (Kataryna Wolczuk).

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ISBN 978-83-66413-71-9

www.ies.lublin.pl