13. On the Future of the “Post-Soviet Region”

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Contradictory trends and events appearing after the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union five years ago present analysts with a weighty challenge in attempting to anticipate the political future of the former Soviet region. Will the new states solidify their independent status, or will they tend towards convergence, cooperation, and even reunification? The decision of Russia’s State Duma to denounce the Belovezhsky Agreements and make new agreements on the “extended integration” of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Belarus strongly contrasts with the Russian president’s assignment of nearly independent status to Chechnya. These apparently contradictory actions demonstrate the indefinite political borders and instability of the post-Soviet region. Neither in Russia, nor in the other countries of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), is there yet a sense of “naturalness” or stability in the present political situation. In almost every republic, separatist movements, and some self-proclaimed (i.e., “illegal”) states have emerged. Meanwhile, all manner of integrationist ideas and initiatives are proposed simultaneously. It could take decades for the region to assume a stable form, and there is no guarantee that by then all of the present states will still exist.

In 1989–1991, anti-Soviet feelings were on the rise. Politicians, publicists, and scholars strove to harness these feelings and express them in compelling terms. At that time, while various “anti-imperial” thoughts and phrases filled newspapers and magazines, nobody was concerned with consistency or logic. The idea of sovereignty for the republics was presented side by side with the idea of ethnic minorities’ rights to independence from Russia. People called simultaneously for the weakening and even elimination of the “center” and for the “center” to take Karabakh from Azerbaijan and give it Armenia. In all of the republics, including Russia, exacting calculations were published claiming to demonstrate the losses each republic incurred by remaining in the USSR, how much it was being exploited, and how much better off it would be on its own. The intensity of feelings against the Soviet Union allowed the pundits to

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1 Although full independence is still being sought in a protracted civil war.
overlook the contradictions and dangerous implications of these ideas and proposals.

The USSR fell apart, but the quality of life in the newly independent states deteriorated instead of improving. In the face of this reality, the prevailing mood began to change. Blueprints for various new unions were proposed. New financial calculations were offered showing how much each republic loses as a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The concept of “geopolitics” came into fashion, as well as all sorts of arguments that Russia was preordained by its nature and its history to be the nucleus of a large, politically unified expanse. The Communists and Zhirinovsky’s crowd became Russia’s most powerful political parties, and Yeltsin started speaking of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as Russia’s “sphere of interest.” The main threat to Russia’s security was now the expansion of NATO, while Dudaev was declared the ringleader of a criminal gang of separatists. All of these developments pointed to a strengthening of the political cohesiveness of the region, based on Russian dominance, or, simply, a harkening back to Soviet times.

The most unusual and unexpected events can take place in the post-Soviet realm as a result of such swings in the public mood. This instability is reinforced by politicians’ desire to promote these vacillations and use them for their own interests. Although one may postulate a multitude of possible events, ranging from Russia’s involvement in wars with its neighbors to the formation of some sort of a “confederation,” there is a limiting “corridor of possibilities” of what may occur in the former Soviet region. The established characteristics of the region and long-term tendencies point to a particular direction of movement within this “corridor of possibilities”—movement beyond which is highly unlikely. The goal of this chapter is to describe the basic characteristics of the region based on its political and cultural history, and the “corridor of possibilities” for the future of the region.

The most fundamental (and, at the same time, most superfluous) characteristic of the region is that the former USSR originated on the territory of the former Russian Empire, which was formed by the Russia’s continuous expansion at the expense of its weaker neighbors. This is the most objective factor by which to define the region. The ties between the various states of the region are numerous and multifaceted, but there is a single element shared by all: each had once been part of the Russian Empire and the USSR. Considering other characteristics of Russia’s provinces and neighboring states, the Lamaist Buryatia would not be in the same community with the distant Protestant Estonia, or Shiite Azerbaijan.
Once having been part of the Russian empire and the USSR links the territories and peoples of this region. The Ottoman Empire had little in common with the British Empire. Nonetheless, one thing empires have in common is the unification by force of many different peoples. The Russian Empire was unique in many ways. In particular, it was a “compact” formation, in which the annexed territories were geographically contiguous, in contrast to the colonial empires created by the Western powers. Russia was the “nucleus” of the empire, and as such, was a rather “heavy” center of gravity. Russian land comprised over half its territory and ethnic Russians comprised nearly half the total population. The non-Russian populations spread around Russia’s perimeter (and within Russia) were much smaller populations. And so the USSR inherited this organizational structure—the heavy Russian “nucleus” and the “medley” periphery—from the Russian Empire. This structure remains in that we tend to consider the post-Soviet region as a whole, which is an accurate view in many ways.

No matter how this expanse is defined both politically and legally (whether it is an empire, the USSR, CIS, or something else), it is still the realm of “Great Russia,” which is the “nucleus” of the empire incorporating the heterogeneous republics located along its perimeter, and which previously were part of Russia. What is obvious is that the established characteristics of relations within this region (the aforementioned “corridor of possibilities” of events and processes taking place there) must correspond to this genesis and to the established organization and history of the entire region.

The comparison, widely used by proponents of integration, of the post-Soviet world with Western Europe (“everybody is uniting while we are breaking up, everybody is removing barriers, while we are putting them up”) does not take into consideration the basic differences in the organization of such regional groupings. The integration of Western Europe within the European Union (EU) is not an integration around a powerful national center which was once the center of a former empire in that region. This is an integration (formally) around Brussels and Strasbourg, and not around Rome, Paris, or Berlin. This is the integration of several relatively equal countries (Germany, France, England, Italy), with smaller countries able to find their “place” amongst them, not fearing subordination or absorption. We should compare our expanse not to that of western Europe, but rather to some hypothetical, centrifugal grouping of Luxembourg, Austria, and the Czech Republic around Germany, for example. And, finally, the EU is a an integration of countries which are culturally a great deal closer to each other than the countries of the post-Soviet region.

Within this region, EU-style integration would inevitably stumble upon the real “unequal weights” of the post-Soviet countries, making the establishment of
equal rights among the states as difficult a task as between Gulliver and the Lilliputians. A union where Russia has one vote equal to that of Uzbekistan or Belarus would likely be unstable. This type of integration would stumble across the legacy of the past. Different histories and different balances of power amongst states produce “psychological structures” of political relations between them, and the psychological structure of the former Soviet Union (FSU) region differs greatly from that between West European nations. The historical nature of the FSU region (the features of its genesis and the correlation of forces within it) lead FSU nations to presume Russia would return to its habit of dominating if a strong regional conglomeration were reestablished. Russia’s neighbor states fear dealing with the former “boss,” which continues to be a very powerful neighbor. The intense pride of the former subjects, who have not yet liberated themselves of their “subordination complex,” could eventually lead to the former subjects exacting revenge against Russia for past wrongdoings and to prove Russia is no longer the “boss.” All this makes EEU-style integration within the FSU region practically impossible. The only possible integration would reinstate Russia’s role as the nucleus and head of the union.

In the same way, the disintegration of the FSU region can only be characterized as a scattering away from Russia. All other republics have either nothing to share or connect them (what do, say, Estonia and Turkmenistan really have in common?). However, some do have reasons to establish close ties with each other and could create integrated communities made up of a few nations in geographic and cultural proximity (the Baltics, Central Asia, and, theoretically, the Caucasus). These smaller regional groupings would either replace former ties with Russia—countervailing them and breaking apart the FSU region completely—or conflicts within these groupings could reinforce dependency on Russia, and actually lead to “Russo-centric” reintegration.

Essentially, the FSU retains elements of a community, with Moscow as its natural center. The evolution of relations between the presently independent states of the region will either be Moscow and Russia “gathering the territories,” or the scattering of these territories away from Moscow and Russia. So which will dominate: integration, or disintegration and scattering?

**The Evolution of Empires**

We may extrapolate on past trends in order to understand what could happen in the future. Recently, Yeltsin, while defending himself against accusations that he was responsible for the Soviet Union’s collapse, said that the process had started at least ten years prior to the Belovezhsky Agreements. This, of course, is not so.
The disintegration of Russia’s “imperial realm” began not ten years prior, but at least 100 years prior to 1991. Of course, it is impossible to pinpoint a specific date for the beginning of the disintegration, just as you cannot pinpoint the exact starting point of a person’s aging process. However, for imperial Russia, the onset of decay can be traced back to the times of Alexander II. At that time, while the empire was still expanding, the first signs of its disintegration were visible. What was the cause? The same thing that led to the collapse of all empires—the irreversible democratization of public life and culture, leading to the consolidation of nations and independence movements. Cultural and power gaps between those who had built the empires and those who had been subordinated and subjugated by them were beginning to decrease. Growing literacy, the emergence of a national elite, intelligentsia, culture and consciousness—all these natural, irreversible processes began long before the formation of the Soviet Union. All were processes leading to the disintegration of the Russian Empire and, ultimately, of the Soviet Union.

Despite some differences, a general process can be identified in the cultural and political development of the colonized territories of all empires as they evolved towards nationhood. For example, the emergence of a nationalist, political movement by the Ukrainians is analogous to that of the Czechs. Heroic figures such as Chokan Valikhanov, a Kazakh, or Kazimbek, an Azeri, expressed their devotion to the empire, while, at the same time, they tried to stir up their people. They are very similar to figures in other empires. There is much that can be learned from the history of these processes by comparing and contrasting them, however, it is obvious that there were common patterns and a common logic to these processes in different empires.

In all empires, the actions of those trying to strengthen it ultimately lead to the same result as for those consciously trying to pull it apart. The emphasis placed by Russia’s government on the Russian character of the monarchy, supported by rising Russian nationalism, was responsible for the disintegration of the empire in the same measure as the emerging separatist movements. In addition, the emergence of a strata of devoted, Russian-educated functionaries, officers and intelligentsia for the purpose of managing the outlying districts in the end led to the creation of leaders of separatist-nationalist movements, as had occurred in the British and French empires. Repression produced heroes. Resistance symbols like T. Shevchenko were partially responsible for Russia’s disintegration, but concessions made by the top echelon of power were also responsible.
The Russian Empire Recreated As the Soviet Union

By the time of World War I and the Revolution, Russia was a noticeably weaker formation than it had been in the 19th century. It was being devoured from within by a multitude of autonomous movements which were becoming more and more popular, and on the other hand, by Russian nationalism. A gradually shifting balance of power between the center, “the nucleus,” and the periphery was by then apparent, with the center experiencing increasingly greater difficulties in controlling the periphery. However, World War I, which turned into the Civil War in Russia, served as a powerful catalyst for the separatist processes, certainly prompting the periphery’s nationalists to take advantage of the situation and declare independence. However, the Bolshevik victory led to the revival of unity within the imperial territory, with only the loss of Poland and Finland (which were always ready to secede from Russia) and, for a period of twenty years, the Baltic countries. Does this mean that the Soviets managed to arrest the disintegration process? The Bolsheviks were perhaps able to slow the internal decay of the empire by radically altering it. Nonetheless, the aging and disintegrating processes continued.

There are two reasons why it was relatively easy for the Bolsheviks to reintegrate the empire. First of all, the disintegration which took place in 1917-1918 was partly the result of attacks from the outside and, in some ways, was premature. All nationalist movements experience periods of rapid growth alternating with periods of retreat and stagnation, periods of enthusiasm alternating with periods of despair. To attain independence on the first attempt is very rare. If, by the time of the Russian revolution, the national movements of the Poles, Finns and, to a lesser extent, the Baltic peoples, could have supported independent, modern states and were kept in the empire by sheer force, the Ukrainians, Kazakhs, and others were not ready for independence. Even in 1917, the majority of peoples making up the Russian empire did not think about total independence and, instead, strove only for autonomy. For these people, the attainment of independence during the period of civil war in Russia was the first and unsuccessful attempt.

Secondly, the Bolsheviks were able to disarm the ethnic movements, which were struggling and unsure of themselves, by their arguments for “internationalism” and by the fact that the country being created (or recreated) by them, was a country called USSR and not “Russia.” The new country was proclaimed to be a union of equals. We can say that the preservation of the major portion of the Russian empire was “bought” by the Bolsheviks, and the price paid was the creation of a state without the word “Russia” in it, and the division of the empire
into republics. The indigenous people of the outlying territories were given the opportunity to develop along their national lines, an opportunity never before presented to them.

Toward the end of the Stalin years, the imperial Russian character of the USSR became obvious, being manifested in its ideology, symbolism, and politics. Although Lenin apparently wanted to create a union of equal republics, he had essentially recreated the empire because the republics as semi-autonomous could not have been anything more than fiction at that time, given their level of development. Stalin later strove for the creation of a highly centralized, totalitarian state with a markedly Russian, imperial character. He succeeded in this, but he could not stop the natural process of disintegration of the empire as the republics continued to develop politically, economically, and culturally. Moreover, the disintegration was exacerbated by Stalin’s own actions.

Even under a completely totalitarian regime, there are powerful limitations imposed on this power, the mechanism of which is not always clear. Stalin could move entire ethnic populations from one location to another, but he could not do away with the constitutional formula of a union of free republics with a right to secession. We can say that he did not even want to do away with it—the formula seemed to be harmless demagogy. But as the republics developed, they were able to progressively consolidate their power and extract concessions from Moscow. With all the repression, and with all the “Russianizing” politics, the Stalinist regime also paid tremendous “tribute” to the ethnic republics. This included the strengthening of the republican governing systems with their own central committees, ministries, academy of sciences, etc. It also included the cultivation of national intelligentsia and the creation of written languages for those ethnic groups which did not have them before, as well as recording and studying their folklore, etc. All this was the continuation of work begun in the Russian Empire and which, regardless of the goals of the officials, resulted in rousing the people in the regions bordering Russia, helping them to become modern nations. These developments served to fundamentally alter the balance of power between the “nucleus” and the outlying districts and contribute to the disintegration of the empire.

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2 Russia did not have its own Central Committee, or Academies of Art and Sciences, because the Russian leadership was the Union leadership, and Russia represented not just one of the republics but a “nucleus.”
After Stalin: Consolidation of Republic Elites

The USSR can be seen as a transitional formation, a compromise, corresponding to a certain balance of power between the “nucleus” and the outlying districts of the empire. The outlying districts were at a point of development that a pure empire was no longer possible, but full independence was not yet possible. This balance, however, was gradually disturbed, particularly after the Stalinist reign of terror. A new elite began to consolidate along the regional and republican borders, within the party-bureaucratic system. Even under Brezhnev, the republican elite had already attained a level of “semi-independence,” and S. Rashidov, G. Aliev, D. Kunaev, etc., were no longer simply Moscow’s governor-generals, but, rather, smaller tsars of their emerging nations.

The resistance encountered by M. Gorbachev when he sent an ethnic Russian, G. Kolbin, to Kazakhstan—essentially an attempt to disturb the existing real independence of the republican government—demonstrated how far these processes had evolved. Under Stalin’s appointee, F. Goloschekin, one-third of the Kazakhs were annihilated, while at the same time the Kazakh language, intelligentsia, and bureaucracy continued to develop. Under Kunaev’s rule, Kazakhstan was moving steadily toward modern “Nazarbaev” Kazakhstan, and still continues to move ahead.

The ease with which the breakup ultimately occurred—the almost obscenely simple process of doing away with the USSR in the Belovezhsky Woods—attests to the level of preparedness the republics had reached for this result. The “children” finished off the “old man,” which was easy because he had no strength left in him. But was the collapse of the USSR the final disintegration of the “imperial realm”?

The 1991 Collapse of the Soviet Union

The non-Russian republics were better prepared for the 1991 disintegration than for the 1917-1918 disintegration. By 1991, the republics were more viable as independent states than the ephemeral formations, approximating republics, had been after the Russian Civil War. However, there are indicators that even in 1991 not all the republics were equally prepared for independence. In this author’s view, there is no doubt that the best scenario for all the republics would have been to preserve the union longer, but as a “looser” union based on treaties, which is what Gorbachev tried to attain. Within such a union, the center (Russia) would have provided a certain level of stability necessary for further development of the republic governments and inter-republic relations. This new
arrangement would not have saved the imperial union from ultimate disintegration, but could have slowed the breakup and made it less painful. But this view was not widely held. Most believed that if the destruction of the Soviet Union were delayed, it would regain its strength. This possibility was widely feared, while defenders of the Soviet Union were naive in thinking that if they were to forestall the death of “the old man,” he would never die.

In their current state, the majority of the Soviet Union’s former republics are much less viable as independent states than their formal status may lead us to believe. The formal structure does not necessarily reflect the underlying reality. Unity of the region is maintained because the republics continue to be connected to one another by numerous economic, cultural, personal, and other ties. These ties are still tighter than those with countries located on the other side of the FSU region’s border and which otherwise appear closer to them in language, religion, and culture. Even the Baltic republics show by their reactions to any hints of imperial encroachment emanating from Moscow that they have not psychologically fully left the realm. In many aspects of inter-state relations in the FSU region, Moscow remains the center, and Yeltsin is still “the boss.”

Only the Baltic republics, the ones most prepared for independence in terms of the level of national self-consciousness and political organization, were able to completely cut formal ties with Russia and the CIS. All the other former Soviet republics joined the CIS, the successor to the USSR, just as the USSR was the successor to the Russian Empire. Georgia and Azerbaijan at first refused, but they were eventually incorporated.

In theory, all states are equal in the CIS. But, in the face of actual inequality, this theoretical equality becomes fiction, though not to the extent it was in the USSR since the balance of powers has changed. The formal structure of equal states simply does not work and is gradually emerging, instead, as a system of bilateral relations primarily between Russia and each of the other states. Not Minsk, but Moscow is becoming the capital of the CIS, and Yeltsin is its head. The chairman of the CIS parliamentary assembly is the chairman of Russia’s Federation Council. In the case of Belarus, Russia is in the process of forming some sort of a confederation with that state, essentially absorbing it as Belarus is very weak in terms of national self-consciousness. The very poor republics with large Russian communities, like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, are far more conscious than Belarus of having a unique national character. For those states, relations with Russia will be close, but they won’t form a confederation. Russia’s relations with Armenia will be special because Armenia depends on Russia for assistance in defending against its neighbors. Tadzikistan is in a similar position, having won their civil war with the help of Russia’s army, and which generally depends on
Russia. After total disintegration, vestiges of the former empire are gradually being restored.

The psychological structure inherent to the region, with Russia as the leader and focal point, persists. Although Russia is weaker in its relations with the former republics than it was in the Soviet Union, it is still stronger than the other FSU states. An air of superiority is always present in Russia’s relations with the other CIS countries, although this attitude is somewhat strained and frustrated under the constraints of formal equality.

The leaders of the CIS countries are constantly paying visits to Moscow, while Yeltsin does not return the favor. Russia continually plays the role of a stronger state slighting the weaker ones. A key example is Russia’s unilateral decision to initiate price liberalization, thereby sending the economies of all the other republics into convulsions. However, Russia cannot retain its position as leader in the region by force alone, forcing Russia to be cautious and in some cases even make concessions to its weaker neighbors. Russia may at times take advantage of conflicts between neighbors, although it has also shown a tendency to abide by international law. Each time, for example, the reconfiguration of borders is proposed, Russia stops short—Russia did not recognize Karabakh or Abkhazia, and avoided supporting Russian separatists in the Crimea, Moldova’s Left Bank region, and Kazakhstan.

The attitude of Russia’s weaker neighbors is as complex as Russia’s attitude toward them. The notion that Moscow is the inevitable center is deeply rooted in the CIS states. Assumptions about Russia’s mighty power are also often exaggerated, although the Georgians and Azeris have learned that they can’t make Moscow change its mind. At times, the CIS republics also attempt to take advantage of Russia, playing on its vulnerabilities—such as when Karabakh claims to be Russia’s outpost in the Caucasus. The leaders of the newly independent states also try to maintain their pride in relations with Moscow and, undoubtedly, dream about a future when they will no longer depend on and have to pay tribute to Russia.

The Future of the CIS

The USSR is dead, but its influence lives on in the CIS. However, the same processes which began over 100 years ago and which led to the fall of the Russian Empire, and later the formation and collapse of a less imperial formation, the USSR, which in turn eventually gave rise to the CIS, continue to operate today.
As long as a formal structure, combined with informal ties, links the entities of the region together, the “aging process” will continue.

Since the majority of the republics were not prepared for independence, they encountered great difficulties after the disintegration of the USSR. The euphoria of independence was quickly replaced with disappointment and tendencies toward reintegration. To a certain extent, what occurred after the fall of the Russian Empire is repeating itself. But this is a development along a downward spiral. Each time the cohesiveness of the region under Moscow’s dominance is broken, it is restored in a more truncated and looser form.

This tendency towards disintegration of regional cohesiveness can now be observed in all spheres of life. Migration is producing greater ethnic homogeneity of the republics. National languages are gradually replacing Russian, while the influence of a single Communist ideology has disintegrated throughout Russia, giving way to a variety of religions. Non-Russians are reorienting to their national culture and are establishing closer ties with nations more culturally similar to their own, rather than with Russia. Economic ties are also shifting away from Russia, towards markets outside the FSU region. State governing systems are developing, and diverging, making it impossible for the systems of, say, Turkmenistan and Estonia, to be “combined” as part of a unified state. Perhaps within a generation, the people of Russia and the other former Soviet states will consider as normal the independent existence of each of these states which were once part of a single empire.

The tendency toward disintegration affects Russia’s own territory to some extent. This primarily does not concern the Russian oblasts (which I believe are not in danger of seceding), but rather the relations between Russia and the culturally distinct outlying districts within the Russian Federation. Relations with Ilyumzhinov’s Kalmykia, Galazov’s Ossetia, or Shaimiev’s Tatarstan under Yeltsin are very similar to the relations with Kunaev’s Kazakhstan or Rashidov’s Uzbekistan in the USSR under Brezhnev. At the same time, the real differences between Russia and these cultures may not be compatible with their (somewhat incidental) legal status. Relations between Russia and these territories (in the extreme case, with secessionist Chechnya) promise to be a source of tension within the Russian Federation, and within the region as a whole, for a long time.

The cohesiveness of the region continues to disintegrate despite Russia’s resistance and, as was the case with the Belovezhsky Agreements, the resistance itself leads to further disintegration. Perhaps none wishes for the reintegration of the Soviet Union more than Zhirinovsky, yet nobody is doing more to prevent it from happening. Russia’s actions intended to avert disintegration in reality can
actually foster it. For example, Russia’s support of Abkhazian separatism was intended to “punish” Georgia and preserve it in Russia’s sphere of influence, but it actually spurred Chechen separatism and Georgia’s desire to leave Russia’s sphere of influence as soon as possible.

Conclusion

The overall tone of this chapter is somewhat somber. This is natural, since the processes described are the processes of dying. Of course, the death of an empire is followed by the emergence of new states, and a new, “non-imperial” Russia. It is possible to focus on these developments and speak only of the new growth processes in a more optimistic tone. It seems to me, though, that this tone would be artificial and insincere.

One of the most peculiar aspects of Soviet ideology was that, although the state we lived in was classified as an “empire” (defined as involuntary unification of peoples by use of force), we, nonetheless, had been taught that an “empire” is something bad and vile, a “prison of all peoples.” This partially explains why, as soon as the USSR became known as an “empire,” we began to destroy it. However, empires may also be viewed as a great human community, where life is in some ways richer, more complex, more varied and interesting than in individual national states. The Soviet “empire” embodied the contradiction of oppression of the peoples while simultaneously allowing them to develop.

When the English, the French, the Russians, and others built empires, they not only oppressed and exploited the people subjugated by them, but also formed them into modern societies. We could sing praises to their role in development and to their constructive impacts on the territories that they colonized. It is sufficient to compare Afghanistan, which succeeded in fighting off the British, with India and understand that Afghanistan may have been much better off had it not dispelled the British successfully. An empire is not entirely negative, and, accordingly, its disintegration is not entirely positive.

When an empire first breaks apart, it is accompanied by cultural, economic, and social disruption. Sometimes, as seen in a number of African countries, civil or tribal wars erupt. The former colonizers, without whom many of the newly free people might have been living in worse conditions, are accused of all manner of sins. After the collapse, life is especially difficult for those of the colonizing nation who remain on the territory of the new states, such as the French in Algeria, the English in Africa, and the Russians in the states along its perimeter. Many of those who previously complained of the empire find themselves longing
for it later. As with London and Paris after the collapse of their empires, Moscow is attracting migrating “colonial intellectuals.”

A beautiful story by the Austrian writer Joseph Rota entitled “Kaiser’s Bust” tells of nostalgia for the lost empire when a general living in free Polish Galicia gives a reverential burial ceremony to a bust of the Kaiser Franz Joseph, after it was no longer considered proper to display it in his yard. Such a feeling of nostalgia certainly exists among those who had been citizens of the USSR. However, it is one thing to feel sad about the past, but yet another to attempt to bring it back. The USSR was an “old man” that should have been protected, and not killed. But it cannot now be brought back.

The process of disintegration of the Soviet empire was perhaps accelerated artificially in the Belovezhsky Woods. The creation of a border between Russia and Ukraine, with border guards, guard dogs, and night alarms is an absurd extreme. We do have to understand clearly, however, that the dependence of the republics on Moscow will disappear with time. The Baltic states will have closer relations with Scandinavia, Moldova will have closer relations with Romania, and the Turkish states will have closer relations with Turkey, than with Moscow. Sooner or later, Russia will have to agree to Chechen independence. The stronger Russia’s resistance is to it, the more rapidly and painfully the inevitable result will come. In the last few years, Russia has already committed a number of stupid and cruel acts, for which Russia will have to pay later. The next several generations of Chechens, for instance, will certainly be raised on the epic story of the struggle between their heroes and the “bloodthirsty, but cowardly Russian butchers.” Russia does not and will not have the strength for reunification of an empire by force. It is better not to start again for the third time, which could only lead to an embarrassing end for Russia.

An empire is not necessarily bad, and independence is, by far, not always good. However, empires are formations whose time has past for the people of the former Soviet region, and for humanity as a whole. The cohesiveness of the region will continue to disintegrate further. It will be increasingly more difficult for Russia to control this disintegration. But Russia can live peacefully amongst neighbors which are not under its control if peace is maintained and if Russia has not created around itself a ring of adversaries. Russia’s goal in the post-Soviet region must not be to reinstate dominance, but to transform it into a peaceful region with productive relations between neighboring states. As simple as this task may seem, it is the most complicated option. It requires Russia to exercise self-control over its own habits and impulses, and this, as many know from personal experience, is the most difficult task of all.