

## Region-Building in the Former Soviet Space

This chapter opens with a review of the main literature dealing with post-Soviet regionalism. Furthermore, it offers a bird's eye view of different imperial histories through a brief trans-historical analysis aimed at underlining the relevance of path dependencies in the configuration of the post-Soviet region (Beissinger 1995).<sup>1</sup>

In addition to its “post-imperial” dimension, the disintegration of the Soviet Union has been considered an example of a comprehensive process of dissolution and dismemberment of complex polities, and therefore viewed through the lenses of international fragmentation and changes in territoriality (Ruggie 1993).

Setting aside the normative implications and political connotations of the concept of “empire” and the problematic aspects of “imperial comparativism” (Gerasimov et al. 2005)—a field which has emerged in particular after the implosion of the Soviet Union—this chapter shifts to instead consider the conceptualisation of post-unitary systems: how agencies and structures organise and relations between centres and peripheries transform. In particular, post-unitary systems display a duality between the persistence of path dependencies (Pierson 2000) and attempts to break out of them. Re-integrative endeavours involve both these tendencies, as they reproduce historical legacies of embeddedness whilst at the same challenging the former strategies of “peripheral segmentation” (Nexon and Wright 2005; see also Motyl 2001) through which the unitary system was governed. I propose paying attention to “the shadow of the past”, understood as the sedimentation of past historical legacies, as a

preliminary step to appreciating two simultaneous lines of development: the re-organisation of political space and the political re-organisation of space.

Finally, this chapter advances new avenues for thinking about the post-Soviet region, establishing four overall conceptual objectives: to deconstruct, spin, comprise and compare.

## 1 THE FORMER SOVIET SPACE AS A REGION

One of the first attempts to conceptualise the former Soviet space as a region was presented in the pivotal volume on regional orders edited by David Lake and Patrick Morgan. In this volume, indeed, Roeder (1997) argues that “the space previously within the Soviet Union now constitutes a distinct international region” (p. 220); furthermore, he identifies the features shaping the structure of the post-Soviet regional complex, such as the priority granted to survival objectives amongst the successor governments and the considerable impact of Russian hegemony. These two crucial conditions had a number of direct consequences, for example the tendency of many post-Soviet leaders to delegate a portion of their “sovereign prerogatives” to Moscow, the prevalence of a hub-and-spoke configuration based on bilateral interactions between Russia and the individual post-Soviet countries, and the relative autonomy of the post-Soviet regional complex vis-à-vis extra-regional actors in the early stage of post-Soviet de-integration. However, in spite of the relevance of Russian hegemony and power asymmetries in shaping the structure of the post-Soviet regional complex, in the early 1990s regional actors interacted with Moscow in ways that did not straightforwardly reflect disparities vis-à-vis Russia (Roeder 1997, p. 231). Furthermore, whilst the former Soviet space was identified as a regional complex, it was also characterised by a segmented conformation: the region was clearly composed of four distinct “theatres” (the Western sector including Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova; the Baltics; South Caucasus; and Central Asia) and each country developed a different orientation towards the regional complex as a whole.

Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003) have further elaborated the conceptualisation of the former Soviet space in regional terms. Their framework draws on the fact that the regionalist awakening/revival has developed parallel to the advancement of a “broadened and deepened” understanding of security (Krause and Williams 1996) that deserves

to be studied through a relational approach (Buzan et al. 1998): “in security terms, ‘region’ means that a distinct and significant subsystem of security relations exists among a set of states whose fate is that they have been locked into geographical proximity to each other” (Buzan 1991, p. 188). Buzan and Wæver’s model introduces the idea of clusters of security interdependence; accordingly, they view the former Soviet space as a “Russia-centred” regional security complex which is included in a broader “European supercomplex” and in turn contains, “mini-complexes” playing the role of buffers and/or insulators. As a regional security complex, they depict the former Soviet space as “self-contained” (“mutually exclusive”) and study it in terms of its structure, the way it is defined by the interactions occurring at the different levels comprised of each individual “security constellations”, and processes of securitisation and de-securitisation.

The approaches developed by Lake and Morgan and Buzan and Wæver have both paved the way to addressing the concept of region in a way that moves away from measuring off the institutional output of regional interactions; they have instead assessed the performance of regional organisations in terms of their effectiveness and legitimacy. Nevertheless, their frameworks have not problematised or deconstructed the meaning of “former Soviet space” and its designation as a region. Secondly, they have implied (at least in their original formulations) a state-centric vision that reflects neither the reality of post-Soviet statehood nor the coincidence of different polity-building processes. Thirdly, since these approaches have not effectively unpacked the notion of “post-Soviet region”, they have in turn failed to fully investigate the varieties of regional interactions and configurations.

In his survey of the existing literature about regional integration in the former Soviet space, Alexander Libman (2012) has attempted to sketch the features of the “average post-Soviet integration paper” by looking at the work produced by both Russian and non-Russian scholarly communities. Drawing on Libman’s review, it appears that the mainstream literature about the post-Soviet region suffers from four major limitations: first, it displays an imbalance in which normative and/or descriptive approaches outnumber analytic perspectives and explanatory attempts; second, it shows a highly evident Euro-centric bias resulting in loose comparative practices: the EU is often presented as a reference model that regional actors can learn from or distance themselves from. Third, processes of region-building in the post-Soviet

space are frequently introduced as an aspect of Russia's foreign policy, thereby depriving the other post-Soviet countries of any agency: their ownership is assumed to be exogenously given. Finally, all instances of post-Soviet regionalism are considered in terms of dysfunctionality and non-effectiveness.

The literature does indeed agree that post-Soviet regional organisations have failed to produce integration or other forms of regional governance, arguing that their viability is thwarted by power asymmetries, the involvement of external actors and the fact that they comprise heterogeneous members with divergent interests and strategies. Nevertheless, this emphasis on the failures of post-Soviet regionalism (e.g. Kubicek 2009) does not explain the proliferation of regional organisations and the continued participation of post-Soviet countries. At present, the only convincing explanation for the fact that post-Soviet countries have repeatedly engaged in "new rounds of 'integration rituals'" (Libman 2012, p. 51) is connected to the interpretation of regional organisations in the former Soviet space as examples of "summitry" regionalism. The absence of any real political commitment or enforcement mechanism is balanced by the tendency for post-Soviet leadership to "demonstrate support and loyalty towards one another in order to raise the status, image, and formal sovereignty of their often authoritarian regimes" (Söderbaum 2012, p. 61). In fact, post-Soviet regionalism (and the apparent hyper-activism displayed by a number of post-Soviet countries when it comes to their multiple memberships in these ROs) has been explained as the manifestation of political solidarity and normative consonance amongst regimes, which is to be distinguished from mere inter-state cooperation.

This perspective has been expressed by different authors and through different concepts that have in common several concerns, namely the rhetorical purpose of regional institutions ("virtual regionalism", Allison 2008; "symbolic regionalism", Söderbaum 2010), their instrumentality (to meet the personal needs and ambitions of presidents, oligarchs and bureaucrats) and the fulfilment of a normative agenda. From this perspective, ROs have been seen as fora for legitimising the policy preferences of various regimes before both national and international audiences.<sup>2</sup> In other words, regional organisations in the former Soviet space have been explained as a way of coordinating to resist democratisation (Ambrosio 2009, pp. 159–184) and in terms of "protective integration", the main rationale of which is to guard members' regime security

and defend incumbent elites from the challenges of external agendas championing good governance or democracy (Allison 2010).

These explanations do capture the design and resilience of regional institutions. On the other hand, however, “regime-boosting” regionalism posits that the main function of post-Soviet regional organisations is to support the members’ rulers and keep them in power (Söderbaum 2004, in particular Chap. 5, pp. 68–114). Accordingly, this explanatory line seems to assume that the countries whose regimes are allegedly being boosted display homogeneous or convergent political trajectories and that regional organisations’ members enjoy steady development in domestic politics. In reality, whilst the majority of post-Soviet countries obviously display traits typical of transitioning states, the internal distribution of power and the quality of hybrid regimes varies quite widely across the region. Moreover, a number of post-Soviet countries have gone through reforms and backlashes, leadership turnovers and alternating phases of improvement and deterioration in their democratic performance: these trajectories have not necessarily corresponded to parallel changes in the ROs’ membership (i.e. before and after the Colour Revolutions). Instead of “regime-boosting” regionalism, what all the post-Soviet countries share is the objective of boosting their sovereignty: whereas “regime-boosting regionalism” and “sovereignty-boosting regionalism” have not been conceptualised separately, they hint at different political processes and outcomes. “Sovereignty-boosting” regionalism actually implies that regionalism might serve the purpose of reproducing, consolidating and legitimising the state itself, and that regional diplomacy and institution-building—even when virtual—substantiate formal representations of the state.

Whether regional organisations in the former Soviet space have boosted members’ regimes or sovereignty will be investigated in the final part of this book (where I juxtapose the concepts of “regime-boosting regionalism” and “sovereignty-boosting regionalism” to “bureaucracy-boosting regionalism” and “sovereignty-shaping regionalism”). For the sake of a literature review, suffice it to mention that neither “regime-boosting” nor “sovereignty-boosting” regionalism per se explains the multiplicity of post-Soviet regionalism and the simultaneous participation of post-Soviet countries in different regional frameworks.

In fact, the most evident feature of the post-Soviet ‘multiplex’ is the presence of nested regional institutions and, even more convolutedly, overlapping regionalism<sup>3</sup> (Aggarwal 1998). The proliferation of regional

organisations in the former Soviet space has contributed to the development of a region which is “multiply traversed” by a wide range of cooperative structures, conflictual cleavages, coalitions and alignments.

On the one hand, a number of countries in the region are members of institutions which are imbricated one within the other almost as if forming concentric circles, like Matryoshka dolls (Brosig 2011, p. 151). Although the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and diverse experiments of Central Asian sub-regionalisms<sup>4</sup> were conceived of as formally independent projects or institutions (not nested in terms of their mandate), the configurations of membership all represented different CIS-subsets (nested in terms of their membership). Over the last two decades, this “nested equilibrium” has been unsettled by different factors. First, since the early 1990s, different instances of regionalism have integrated the fragments of the post-Soviet space with extra-regional actors: all CIS members joined OSCE in January 1992 (except for Russia, which was declared the USSR’s continuator state), whilst—at different times—the majority of post-Soviet countries established varying relations with other “Western” institutions such as the Council of Europe (COE),<sup>5</sup> the European Union and NATO.<sup>6</sup> Second, the Organisation for Democratic and Economic Development (GUAM) and later the Community of Democratic Choice exposed the former Soviet space to alternative sets of norms<sup>7</sup>: GUAM in particular implicitly introduced the first seeds of sub-regional pluralism within the CIS and sanctioned the creation of two alternative but overlapping alignments within the same regional space. Third, the institutionalisation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation brought a “hegemonic outsider” into the post-Soviet region—China.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of this fact, CIS members’ decision-makers and representatives often depicted the organisation as the focal institution of a “hierarchically ordered” structure and the only hub for effective inter-institutional coordination. In an interview released in December 2007, CIS Executive Secretary Sergei Lebedev even denied that CIS, GUAM and SCO were actually “parallel” regional organisations, provided that the majority of the members of SCO and all the members of GUAM were also included in the CIS and there were several instances of interaction both between CIS and SCO and between CIS and GUAM. Accordingly, the intersection of different institutions only confirmed the increasing role regional organisations played in the globalised world. Similar interviews released in 2008 and 2009 restated this position

(although GUAM was gradually “removed” from this kind of narrative): according to statements, proliferation did not indicate the weakening or the exhaustion of the CIS and problems of duplication would have been smoothly and successfully contained. According to Lebedev, the different tools of regional cooperation could complement each other just as the craftsman works with a hammer when dealing with nails and a screw-driver when dealing with screws (“Вечерний Бишкек”, 19 May 2011).

Overlapping regionalism instead encouraged the states with multiple memberships to adopt a “pick and choose” approach and take advantage of “issue fragmentation” in different multilateral contexts. This might constitute an explanation for why there have been repeated attempts at regional institution-building despite their low functioning and performance: overlapping regionalism, indeed, can be pursued as a strategic choice by the actors involved, actors that deliberately aim at playing across different multilateral fora (forum shopping), selecting the negotiation venue in which they can most efficiently advance their preferences.<sup>9</sup> For instance, multiple institutions might be created to downplay the role of an existing one (strategic inconsistency, Raustiala and Victor 2004), or member states might pursue different policies and try to push the organisations in different directions, thus acting as chessboard players (strategic ambiguity, Alter and Meunier 2009, p. 17<sup>10</sup>). Forum shopping, strategic inconsistency and strategic ambiguity have different kinds of impact on the level of inter-institutional consistency and coordination, but they all display members’ emerging capacity to juggle the elements of overlapping regionalism (Russo and Gawrich 2017).

In addition to the literature on overlapping regionalism, there is another—as yet under-explored—thread we can follow to explain the emergence of multiple instances of regionalism in spite of the fact that the post-Soviet countries have recently wrested their way free of a long-term experience of comprehensive integration. This second thread examines post-Soviet regionalism as an instance of imitative institution-building (Schlumberger 2004) and in terms of (regional) institutional façades: employing this approach, it might be plausible to develop the concept of a “Potemkin politics of regionalism”<sup>11</sup> characterised by a decoupling between the semblances of regional organisations and their functions. Considering post-Soviet regionalism as part of a broader phenomenon of Potemkin politics entails studying regional institutions, their bodies and policy-making chains in terms of pseudo-morphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983): the institutional design of post-Soviet

regional organisations resembles other patterns of regionalism which can be similarly observed at the global level. In spite of a supposed homogeneity amongst organisational forms and practices, however, they cannot be interpreted as functionally equivalent to other regional organisations. The added value of exploring the post-Soviet regionalism in terms of Potemkin politics lies not only in acknowledging the existence of institutional façades, but also in recognising that they are a constitutive aspect of post-Soviet politics: indeed, they have actually been described as “complex stage productions conjured by the creative imaginations of political technologists” (Allina-Pisano 2008, p. 41).

As a matter of fact, Allison’s “virtual regionalism” mentioned above draws on a similar line of reasoning, transposing the ideas of virtual politics and virtual state (Wilson 2006; Heathershaw 2014) to the realm of international relations. Nevertheless, virtuality is often treated as a reason to dismiss regionalism as a purely instrumental and narrative epiphenomenon. Defining post-Soviet regionalism as a result of Potemkin politics, instead, necessarily entails acknowledging that a theatrical performance of this kind (*dramaturgia*) “belies the reasons for their existence, which are tangible, concrete, and durable” (Allina-Pisano 2008, p. 42) in spite of its chimerical and deceptive nature. In particular, the production of institutional façades carries the remnants of the socialist past (weak state capacity and a lack of normative commitment to institutional change) but also the “colonial impulses” of international actors: this is the case, for example, when institutional façades serve to legitimise certain political actors in the eyes of internal constituencies as well as external audiences.

The study of nesting/overlapping regionalism is useful for understanding the coexistence of and interplay between different regional organisations in terms of the norms, practices and policies they deliver to the post-Soviet countries. Likewise, exploring the idea of a Potemkin politics of regionalism allows us to reconsider the relevance of actors and policy outcomes that exist primarily in the realm of official records. Nevertheless, both of these approaches restrict the field of investigation to formal institutions and the result thus remains a partial overview.

In order to understand the main features of the post-Soviet fragments, the process of ongoing re-assemblage in which they are involved and their positioning in the regional and international system, it might be useful to consider not only their recent trajectories but also the long-term experiences of boundlessness and territorial integration that have been a persistent, resilient and recurrent condition of the region. These points will be developed in the second section of this chapter.



## 2 FRAGMENTATION AND REINTEGRATION

The representation of “Eurasia” has indeed been defined by the alternation of different empire-builders who followed one another throughout the centuries (Von Hagen 2004) to such an extent that the whole history of the continent has been interpreted according to “regional empire periods” (Beckwith 2011) and its geopolitical perimeter has been drawn according to the phases of imperial expansion and contraction. According to many authors, the current configuration of the Eurasian space reflects in particular the rule of the last two integrated polities that succeeded one another in the same geopolitical expanse—the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union. Following this approach, it is argued that the area should be studied by comparatively investigating the consequences of the collapse of empires, in particular the spatially contiguous ones.<sup>12</sup> As a matter of fact, in the case of scattered/overseas empires the dissolution of the imperial structure leads both the metropolis and the colonies to develop a new order; however, processes of disengagement and dismantling can be gradual and the consequences of these processes can be limited to specific segments of the society and sets of actors. On the contrary, in the case of territorially integrated/contiguous empires the post-imperial order is likely to reproduce some imperial institutions of administration and control and to be affected by a certain continuity amongst elites and cadres as well as “viscosity” in other legacies, both physical (i.e. infrastructures, cross-borders facilities, etc.) and immaterial (political culture and identity). The most effective terms of comparison, therefore, seem to be the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman Empire.<sup>13</sup>

Although these empires do appear to be comparable in many respects, we must also consider two important factors of Soviet “exceptionalism”, starting with the “centre-periphery compact” (Tuminez 2003) Soviet rule drew on for its source of legitimation.

This first aspect has been highlighted in particular by two strands of literature—the one on “subaltern empire” (Morozov 2015) and the one on “affirmative action empire” (Martin 2001a; Martin 2001b)—that emphasise the specificity of the Soviet empire and even question whether the Soviet Union was actually imperial in nature. This ambiguity has recently been investigated through post-colonial lenses as well:

Those who would characterize the Soviet experiment as noncolonial can point, *inter alia*, to the Soviet Union’s wish to liberate its toiling masses; its dismantling of many ethnic-Russian privileges in its east and south; its

support of many Union languages; its development of factories, hospitals, and schools; its liberation of women from the harem and the veil; its support of Third World anticolonial struggles, seen as intimately connected with the Soviet experiment, from 1923 to 1991; and the fact that some minority of the Soviet sphere's non-Russians wished the Bolshevik regime. Those who would argue that the Soviets were simply differently configured colonists could point, again *inter alia*, to the mass and arbitrary relocation of entire non-Russian peoples; the ironic Soviet national fixing of countless formerly less defined identities and the related tortured intertwining of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz-Tajik border to guarantee an ethnic strife; the genocidal settling of the Kazakh nomad millions from 1929 to 1934; the forced monoculture across Central Asia and the consequent ecological disaster of the Aral Sea; the Soviet reconquest of the once independent Baltic states in 1941; the invariable Russian ethnicity of the number-two man in each republic; the inevitable direction of Russia's Third World policy from its Moscow center; and tanks in 1956 and 1968 in Budapest and Prague. Complicating either argument is that the Soviet Union and its predecessor Russian empire were often as lethal to their Russians as to non-Russians, and that the USSR radically de-valued specifically Russian identity for several decades. (Moore 2001, pp. 123–124)

Studies of the so-called affirmative action empire focus on the Soviet Union's ideological objective of reconciling nationalism and international socialism. On the one hand, the Soviet Union was organised along national-territorial lines, thereby “promoting the national consciousness of its ethnic minorities and establishing for them many of the characteristics institutional forms of the nation-state” (Martin 2001a, p. 67). On the other hand, the creation of national territories scattered across the entire expanse of the Soviet Union aimed at reinforcing the unitary state; likewise, the endorsement of non-Russian nation-building represented a form of controlled decolonisation aimed at maintaining Soviet integrity. Nationalisms were therefore *governed* by granting them the *forms* of nationhood (Martin 2001b).

The second reason why the Soviet Union stands out amongst comparative imperial cases has to do with the difference between how empires had normally ended and how the Soviet Union in particular ended. Moreover, historical circumstances in the aftermath of the Soviet breakdown were relatively different from the post-imperial trajectories of the previous centuries, as the post-Soviet period was characterised by the emergence of a multiplicity of contested sovereignties and new “foreign policy-making units” (Skak 1996, p. 7).

The dissolution of both the Ottoman and the Hapsburg empires overlapped with the First World War, which is to be assumed as a constitutive major conflict moulding the emergence of a new international order. The Ottoman Empire collapsed almost through implosion (“imperial decline by means of attrition”, Motyl 1998, p. 20),<sup>14</sup> whilst the Habsburg Empire was dismembered in the immediate aftermath of the WWI, even though several “national questions” had already emerged before the Austro-Hungarian dissolution. In the case of the Soviet Union, the structural change took place without the occurrence of a major war: the end of the Union was ratified though an attempt at “coordinated transition” that took the form of a seven-point plan—a sort of “incubator” which was set up for the successor polities.<sup>15</sup>

According to Susanne Michele Birgeron (2002), there is also a third basis of differentiation amongst the above-mentioned empires to be taken into account: the empires that collapsed before the twentieth century either led the peripheries into anarchy, in which order was established on a local basis by small political groupings (clans, tribes, city-states...), or opened the door to territorial conquest by a neighbouring empire. In contrast, the empires that collapsed during or after the twentieth century resulted in processes of state formation; accordingly, the comparison between the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Soviet Empires seems to show much more nuanced realities and points of differentiation amongst specific “sectors” of the post-imperial peripheries. In fact, in the first two cases the processes of decline and/or dissolution often led to a handover between imperial powers—i.e. one empire’s rule was succeeded by another. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, however, has not been followed by a similar handover of power and the post-Soviet entities, lacking competent institutions, were incapable of exercising effective authority over their territories and were thus characterised by contested boundaries.

The ex-communist elites and local, unequipped proto-institutions were suddenly expected to carry out projects of nation-state-building and push their way through a series of overlapping and alternative sources of authority and identity; whilst most of them officially committed to a formal policy of “de-Sovietisation”, their political activities were affected by the historical fact that “the Soviet state was the first one to impose a system of territorial governance” (Akçali 2003, p. 417) and “nationalities whose experience of statehood and political independence was scant or non-existent (including Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan,

Georgia, Ukraine, and the Central Asian republics) gained the trappings of pseudo-statehood within the Soviet Union” (Tuminez 2003, p. 95).<sup>16</sup>

The very organisation of the Soviet Union, and in particular its ethno-federalist structure and the presence of an indigenised cadres system, has impacted the way post-Soviet republics claimed or approached sovereignty (Beissinger 1997, p. 166; see also Beissinger and Young 2002); furthermore, the classification of Soviet citizens according to nationalities and the territorialisation of group identities based on ethnicity have had long-term repercussions in the political organisation of the post-Soviet order.

In addition to the effects of the “centre-periphery compact” (Tuminez 2003) on relations between territories and power as well as institutional reorganisation, there is another important aspect that shows the extent to which the post-Soviet space is shaped by path dependencies: namely the ideational aspect. As I show in more depth in Chap. 5, the reference to Soviet mentality and “mental maps” is a recurrent feature that influences elites’ narrative templates. The shared Soviet experience constitutes a collective framework of memory that has not only shaped the imagination of the past but also mediated collective imaginaries of the future (Assmann and Shortt 2011).

Past and present patterns of de-integration and re-integration, repeated over time in the long term, have exactly shaped the post-Soviet region, whose units and actors have also formed and morphed according to this dynamics. Such processes can be tentatively captured by reversing the paradigm for the study of political unification elaborated by Amitai Etzioni (1962a, b, 1963), whose paradigm allows us to highlight the fundamental aspects that must be considered if we are to trace how de-integrative and re-integrative courses over the long-term resonate in the current configuration of the post-Soviet region (Table 1).

According to the 1924 Constitution, the Soviet Union was established as a federal structure based on an administrative hierarchy made up of Union Republics and the so-called Autonomies—nationalities and ethnolinguistic groups acknowledged as either Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics, Autonomous Oblast or Autonomous Districts (*Okrug*). The assortment of “autonomies” constituted at the same time the foundation of the Soviet state and an important drive towards de-integration, leading to ethnic issues throughout the whole history of the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> However, their inclinations towards the Soviet Union was not monolithic and has obviously changed across time and space.

**Table 1** Adaptation of Amitai Etzioni's scheme of political unification (as developed by the author)

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1. Unit properties
    - a. Individual properties (i.e. dispositions to be embedded within the integrated system; attitude towards de-integration)
    - b. Analytical properties (i.e. heterogeneity or proximity)
  2. Environmental properties
    - a. Non-social (Ecological) Properties (i.e. territorial disconnection—borders; enclaves/exclaves; cross-border relations and infrastructures)
    - b. Social properties (i.e. inter-republic relations)
  3. System properties (i.e. de-integrative instances before fragmentation; “prodromes of regionness”; historical regions)
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They did not experience similar “anti-union momenta” in terms of either timing or intensity: this point is clearly demonstrated by the sequential timing of the sovereignty and independence declarations (Walker 2003). By a similar token, the Union Republics reacted in diverse ways to the launch of the so-called Novo-Ogarevo process: when Gorbachev announced his plan in June 1990 to establish a “New Union Treaty” amongst Sovereign Socialist Republics, only nine of them agreed to participate in the negotiations, whereas Azerbaijan decided to send its representatives as “observers”. In March 1991, a “Union Referendum” was held posing the question: “Do you consider necessary the preservation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics, in which the rights and freedoms of an individual of any nationality will be fully guaranteed?”. While Moldova, Armenia and Georgia refused to hold the referendum on their territory, 80% of the Soviet electorate turned out for the vote and 76.4% voted yes.<sup>18</sup>

In the early post-Soviet phases, the restructuration of the whole regional system has reverberated the above-mentioned structural features ascribed in the *long durée*, as well as other sources of path dependencies that have exacerbated and/or inhibited de-integrative and re-integrative courses.

First, the concessions granted to the republics through constitutional amendments and federal laws which (especially since the late 1980s) seemed to be designed to contain emerging centrifugal pressures within the Union<sup>19</sup>; second, the “peripheral segmentation” (Nexon and Wright 2005) carried out by central Soviet authorities in order to

reduce the connectivity between different sectors of the periphery (e.g. the dissolution of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic); third, the weak precedents of regionality enacted by the Union Republics before the establishment of the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> These moves, which might be termed “prodromes of regionness,” represent precursory attempts at establishing (sub-) or (mini-)regional groupings in pre-Soviet times.

In the Caucasus, the artificial, top-down disconnect between North and South and the supposedly isolating role of the Caucasian mountains have often coexisted with other instances of region-building and forms of regional connectivity driven by various actors. While geographic determinism would seem to cast mountains as zones of both weak interplay or even conflict, around the Caucasus one can identify quite diverse imaginative geographies and historical projects that contradict a deterministic approach and instead confirm the label “*montagne des peuples*”. At the same time, however, the traditional idea of “Caucasian confederative unity” has never bridged the entire sub-region.

In the North Caucasus, the Union of Mountain Peoples, and subsequently the Mountain Peoples’ Republic, only existed between 1917 and 1918.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in the period in-between the Russian Revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union, the three Transcaucasian nations experimented with the first Transcaucasian Federation. In November of 1917, party representatives from the Georgian Social-Democratic Party, the Azeri Musavat Party (Mensheviks) and the Armenian Dashnaksutiun party met in Tiflis to create an Independent Government of Transcaucasus with the purpose of rejecting the power of the Council of People’s Commissars headed by Lenin and refusing the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The latter, in fact, was signed by the Bolshevik regime without consulting the Caucasian countries even though it involved ceding the South Caucasian provinces to the Ottoman Empire. In April of 1918, the Sejm convened in Tbilisi and released a historical “Declaration of Independence and Sovereignty of the Transcaucasus” announcing their intent to separate from Russia and form a Transcaucasian Federation. The latter lasted only one month, as each nation went into the project with different perspectives, motivations and intentions. Azerbaijan was oriented towards Turkey and Armenia remained loyal to Russia, whilst Georgia secretly negotiated with Germany for an alliance that would have guaranteed its survival and

then declared its independence in May of 1918; consequently, Azerbaijan and Armenia declared their independence as well.<sup>22</sup>

In Central Asia, the reference to supra-national identities (both pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic) impacted the emergence of autochthonous elites and debates. Islam had balanced the coexistence of different political entities and their subjection to colonial rule; accordingly, shared belonging to the *Umma* (community of Muslims) drove the development of political groupings along religious lines in the first decade of the twentieth century. In May of 1917, the Congress of Muslims met in Moscow, recovering a Turkic vision which had been already promoted in the previous early years (All Muslim Congresses in 1905 and 1906). In the end, however, the project of a Muslim Union failed and the Islamic front broke when two political fault lines emerged. First, there was a divide between the “Precursors” (Qadids) and the “Innovators” (Jadids). The Jadids formed the Islamic Council, whilst the Qadids formed a separated Council of Ulema, and the Kazakh-Kyrgyz delegates came together in the Alash Orda.

Secondly, whilst the “centralists” believed that the Islamic community should have been represented as one body with cultural autonomy within a non-federated Russia, the “territorial autonomists” pursued the territorial autonomy of each ethnic group within a federated Russia (Glenn 1999, pp. 65–66).

On the occasion of the Second and Third All Muslim Conferences, nevertheless, the participants expressed their claims of the autonomy of Turkistan, and during the Fourth Extraordinary Regional Muslim Congress a declaration of autonomy was finally formalised. However, two different authorities were established: the Provisional People’s Council of Alash Orda, in the Kazakh-Kyrgyz region, and the Kokand Autonomous Government, later joined by the Turkmenistan Oblast in the TransCaspian Autonomous Government.<sup>23</sup>

Other former Soviet Republics had experienced more or less institutionalised embeddedness in sub-regional, regional and/or transregional spaces before being annexed to/occupied by the Russian Empire, first, and the Soviet Union, later. The belonging to historical regions and past involvements in regional projects might have shaped Soviet Republics’ behaviours, connections and practices within the Union, their development throughout the fragmentation process, and have been shaping their post-independence regionally-scaled posture, especially vis-à-vis de-integrative and re-integrative pressures, and the reference to symbolic

geographies and meta-geographies as cognitive and political structures for actors in transition to organise narratives and foreign policy agendas in the wake of the Soviet dismemberment. Bessarabian Moldova's patterns of exclusion from and inclusion in the pan-Romanian project (1812–1918 and 1918–1940, respectively), alternated with Russian and Soviet annexations, certainly resonated in Moldova's post-1991 course of ambivalence and in-betweenness.

Likewise, the former shared history within the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, whose territory extended in the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries over current Poland, Ukraine, Moldova (Transnistria), Belarus, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, inspired tentative groupings and geopolitical concepts in Central and Eastern Europe decades, if not centuries later (e.g. the confederative idea of “*New Rzeczpospolita*”; the idea of “*Baltic-Black Sea Federation*” developed by a number of Ukrainian intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth—beginning of the twentieth century, revived at different times also by the reference to the project “*Interimarium*”).

By factoring in the “Unit Properties”, “Environmental Properties” and “System Properties” of the partitioning polity, it is possible to gain a perspective on the fragmentation process and the trajectories of individual fragments as well as to see how the current configuration of the post-Soviet region is informed by a partial succession. In particular, the Soviet system has affected the nature of the post-Soviet fragments, especially in terms of the way they redefine sovereignty and territoriality (Cummings and Hinnebusch 2014).

As regards the redefinition of sovereignty, relations between (i) the centre and the Union Republics, (ii) the centre and the Autonomous Republics, and (iii) the Union Republics and the Autonomous Republics were organised according to a complex architecture of “differentiated” and “competing” sovereignties which were “possessed both by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a whole and the Union republics which comprise it. The sovereignty of the Union as a whole and the sovereignty of the Union republics do not negate each other but, rather, are harmoniously combined within constitutionally established limits” (Deyermont 2008, p. 32). This idea of sovereignty later resulted in a series of “sovereignty declarations” which were not univocally identified with acts of secession from the Soviet Union; by the same token, this process of sovereignisation has not prevented immediate or subsequent efforts at re-integration.



Similarly, the unconventional provision of scripts of sovereignty and the coexistence of multiform graduated sovereigntyscapes (Sidaway 2003) paved the way for not only political ambiguities but also legal opacities regarding the way Soviet disintegration was carried out in practical terms: indeed, this disintegration occurred through a process which has been variously identified as partition (which would have entailed a consensual secession), or dismemberment and dissolution (which would have implied the disappearance of the pre-existing state). The Minsk Agreements concluded that “the USSR has ceased to exist as a subject of international law and a geopolitical reality” and recognised the sovereignty and equality of each of the former Soviet republics; however, Russia, Belarus and Ukraine “could only withdraw from the USSR [...] but they were not entitled to dissolve the Union” and they were even less eligible to empower the sovereignty status of the other constituents of a federative state. Nonetheless, the Minsk Agreements stated that “from the moment of signature [...] application of the laws of [...] the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics shall not be permitted in the territories of the signatory States”; therefore, it “created in effect two political entities in the same area since other republics still considered themselves members of the union” (Kembayev 2009, p. 28).

As regards the redefinition of territoriality, it is worth noting that in the wake of the post-Soviet collapse both state-formation and region-formation have entailed a re-articulation of political space according to an internal/external divide (Ruggie 1993; Agnew 2005). This type of divide “comes into being when an internal hierarchical order manages to control the external territorial and functional boundaries so closely that it insulates domestic structuring processes from external influences. In this case, the internal hierarchy presents itself as the single organizing principle of the internal domestic structuring and, at the same time, as the single autonomous centre for external relations” (Bartolini 2005, p. xvi).

Since the post-Soviet region emerged out of a process of creative fragmentation, multiple processes of differentiation occurred at the same time, with the result that multiple overlapping scales of spatial orders coexist (Caporaso 2000, p. 7; Buzan and Albert 2010). State-formation and region-formation might be thus conceived of as being embedded in a co-evolutionary path in which inner and outer consolidations are intimately related. Working on the basis of similar assumptions—that there is a relationship between external political consolidation and internal political structures in any type of political formation—Stefano

Bartolini (2005) has explained the above-mentioned co-evolution as laying the foundations for a general theory of confinement. The latter deals with the constitution of a polity and the definition of its constituent properties according to a threefold course: centre formation, system building and political structuring. The formation of the centre is not necessarily nor solely identified with state formation; rather, it is described as “sub-systemic differentiation” and takes place by setting boundaries and establishing entry/exit options. System building relates to the production of structures and procedures for system maintenance, in other words the way the components of a system are compelled or induced to stay within it through coercive mechanisms, ideational resources and institutions. Finally, political structuring is related to the emergence of political oppositions and alliances amongst collectivities, organisations and territories. These three processes of “polity formation” can likewise be applied to state-formation and region-formation.

### 3 NEW AVENUES FOR THINKING ABOUT THE POST-SOVIET REGION (AND WHY WE NEED THEM)

In addition to considering post-Soviet regionalism as an instance of far-reaching phenomena of international integration and de-integration to be observed at various times in different parts of the world, it is worth exploring the ontology of international regions more broadly in order to position this macro-case study within a more IR-theory-driven set of reflections.

This kind of exploration appears to be necessary given that the post-Soviet region may be juxtaposed to and/or contrasted with other processes of region formation and structuration unfolding in the international system.

Only rarely has our object of study been compared to other regions, and even when it is compared the process of drawing parallels has frequently been affected by a Euro-centric bias<sup>24</sup> or has reiterated an RO-centred approach. Against this background, the positioning of the present research is driven by four objectives: (1) to deconstruct; (2) to spin; (3) to comprise; (4) to compare.

#### 3.1 *To Deconstruct*

In spite of several studies investigating regional interactions in the former Soviet area, the meaning of “post-Soviet region” per se has barely been

unpacked. On the one hand, by qualifying the region as “post-Soviet”, one points towards the reverberations of the hub-and-spoke system in current regional configurations; at the same time, however, this designation tends to downplay the emergence of trans-regional and sub-regional patterns, or trans-boundary non-state regional complexes. Similarly, by qualifying the former Soviet space as a region, the dimension of multiplicity ends up overshadowed: by contrast, acknowledging the existence of post-Soviet spaces and regionalisms in their plurality expresses the fact that a more or less defined group of states is subjected to multi-directional pressures (disintegration vs. re-integration, fragmentation vs. re-composition, interdependence vs. emancipation).

Deconstructing the post-Soviet region therefore entails looking at its contested and constructed nature, identifying who defines it as a region, why it constitutes a region (its “regionhood”<sup>25</sup>) and how it constitutes a region (its “regionality”). Concepts such as “regionhood” (what distinguishes a region from a non-region) and “regionality” (what distinguishes one region from another, Van Langenhove 2003) serve to deconstruct: the post-Soviet region actually appears to represent a clear case in which several different types of regionhood coexist and whose regionality has been diversely constructed by different region-makers over the last two decades.

While the notion of regionhood implies the emergence and development of a region through a dialogical process of formation, it also denotes a process marked by rationality and intentionality. Such features cannot be taken for granted in the case of the post-Soviet region; or at least they are not always present and tangible in each and every manifestation of regional interaction.

### 3.2 *To Spin*

It is possible that the multiplicity encompassed by the post-Soviet region reveals an ongoing and mutual constitution of structures (i.e. regional institutions) and agents (actors operating in the region, i.e. states). This introduces a further element of complexity that prevents the researcher from assuming a neat separation between the region and its region-makers.<sup>26</sup> While most studies on the post-Soviet region focus on the *outputs* of region-building, the mutual constitution of structures and agents in the region might instead be investigated by focusing on the *process* of region-building itself. This proposal that we emphasise process

in the study of regions is not innovative per se; nevertheless, processes of region-making have mostly been approached as regional projects moving along a continuum of regional development. The concept of regionness, for example, has been put forward to analyse the process through which a regional system is transformed into a regional polity and to identify which conditions hinder or facilitate the advancement of a group of countries through different levels of “being a region” (regional space, regional complex, regional society, regional community, region-state).<sup>27</sup> Regionness has been defined as “the process whereby a geographical area is transformed from a passive object to an active subject capable of articulating the transnational interests of the emerging region. Regionness thus implies that a region can be a region ‘more or less’. The level of regionness can both increase and decrease” (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000, p. 461). Accordingly, regionness does not seem to be framed as part of a stage theory, nor does it seemingly lay out “a single path or detailed ‘series of stages’ that are exactly the same for all regions and that must be passed in order for higher levels of regionness to occur” (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000, p. 470). Nevertheless, the five levels of regionness denote a progressive identification of peoples with the region they live in, and a parallel progressive regional cohesion: in other words, regional identification and regional cohesion are expected to evolve in whichever direction and to be constitutively related to one another.

The “teleological progression” implied by the concept of regionness cannot be observed in the post-Soviet region, as this particular region’s long-term re-structuration has been characterised by non-linear trajectories, tipping points and feedback loops. Therefore, what I propose here is to interpret region-building and state-building as two parallel, ongoing processes, and to look at the way interactions between the region and the state constitute both of these elements.

### 3.3 *To Comprise*

In order to paint a holistic picture of post-Soviet region, it is highly important that we comprehensively identify the different elements of regionality. The conceptual toolkit provided by the notion of regional governance allows us to consider the interplay amongst state and non-state actors, formal and informal engagements, regulatory mechanisms and systems of rules and the way all these elements impact on the regional order (Webber et al. 2004; Kirchner 2006; Kirchner and

Sperling 2007). In particular, the post-Soviet region seems to be jointly moulded by formal institutions and actors on one side and informal practices on the other.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, it is possible to detect *regional patterns of practices* that are not necessarily enshrined in formal institutions or included in regular policy-making chains (Russo 2016).

Informal practices can be defined as patterns of actions which are not “regulated, monitored or controlled directly or indirectly by the state” (Routh, quoted in Morris and Polese 2013, p. 3); they can be conceived of as actions whose regulation is not codified and *whose agency is not immediately/publicly traceable*. Moreover, it is important to note that informal practices are neither necessarily put into existence by informal actors/institutions nor limited to *illegal* practices.

Vincent Pouliot first advanced the idea that regions are “constituted by sets of specific ways of doing things—practices—that create more or less ordered spaces and narratives of regional interactions” (Pouliot 2012, p. 210). At the same time, a “practical” interpretation of the post-Soviet region sets out to consider different facets of this region: on the one hand, there are *formal security practices* that have been developed in the framework of the above-mentioned ROs (i.e. joint trainings and exercises) and which are often considered “parades”.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, there are *informal interactions* that have been recognised as a key element in the socialisation of post-Soviet elites in multilateral settings (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, p. 22).

The study of informal *economic* practices has focused on informal trade, employment and entrepreneurship based on trust-sensitive and network-sensitive activities (i.e. itinerant trade and suitcase trade or open-air markets but also bribery, smuggling and what has been termed “the economy of favours”, Ledeneva 1998). It would likely be misleading to describe informal economic practices as a phenomenon that suddenly emerged after the collapse of the formal structures of the socialist order. Rather, “many informal economic practices, witnessed today, developed in the late socialist period and have in fact persisted and played significant roles in shaping the emerging logic(s) of the post-socialist order(s)” (Polese and Rodgers 2011, p. 613). In the same way as informal economic practices, informal *security* practices constitute a crucial dimension of the regional system of governance in the former Soviet space,<sup>30</sup> having emerged as a by-product of corrupted policy makers, transnational and transregional criminal networks, the resilience of traditional/customary institutions, and middle-rank officials acting in

the interstices of dysfunctional state institutions.<sup>31</sup> There are also multiple examples of another practice which frequently manifests across the region: the move to convene loosely-institutionalised regional meetings, workshops and conferences that gather together experts, bureaucrats and representatives of specialised state agencies to deal with diverse issues of regional security (such as the Issyk-Kul Initiative on Border Security in Central Asia, for example). These informal *diplomatic* practices might indeed be reminiscent of “seminar diplomacy”, defined by Emanuel Adler as a form of talk-shop characterised by “face-to-face interactions on a large variety of technical, practical and normative subjects” (Adler 1998, p. 121).

Even though the emergence of informal practices has not marked a divide between Sovietness and post-Sovietness, their presence and persistence has a significant component of path dependency. Moreover, whereas informal practices already existed during the last years of socialism and had an impact on the history of the Soviet Union, it is important to recall that pre-Soviet social structures often relied on informality as well, and these structures have been retrieved in order to construct new political identities and power infrastructures in the last two decades. For these reasons, informal practices can be seen as a “Karstic river” that has criss-crossed the whole of the post-Soviet region at different times and still displays constitutive effects with a significant impact on the regional governance system.

Even though regional organisations have played only a partial role in shaping a system of governance in the former Soviet space, an approach dismissing post-Soviet regionalism just because it is failing or ineffective shows its limitations. Post-Soviet regionalism can be broadly explained as the reverberation of certain elements of Sovietness that are still present in the post-Soviet countries’ political culture. As has been already underlined, an investigation of the rationale and performance of ROs can provide an account of a Potemkin politics of regionalism in which façades and rituals are constitutive features of political interactions. Similarly, the study of regional patterns of practice might help to reveal another feature of post-Soviet politics, namely their informality.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.4 *To Compare*

One of the most avant-garde comparative approaches has been advanced by Kathleen Hancock (2009) in order to make the case for her theory

of plutocratic delegation<sup>33</sup> and thus explain why states decide to pursue economic integration. Hancock based her analysis of regional plutocratic governance structures on the diachronic juxtaposition of three instances of economic integration, each of which involved a very different spatial and temporal context: the Zollverein (German Custom Union, over the first half of the nineteenth century), the Southern African Custom Union (first half of the twentieth century) and the Eurasian Custom Union (mid-1990s). By Hancock's own admission, "plutocratic delegation theory explains plutocracy in a subset of integration cases, custom unions" (Hancock 2009, p. 6). Moreover, her theory seems to assume a teleological evolution according to which a custom union develops into a deeper integrative project and, ultimately, spills over into a political union. According to her perspective, intergovernmental governance structures might finally result in monetary unions and supranational governance structures can lead to federal political systems; quite differently, however, "a plutocratic governance structure taken to its maximum level of integration ends in empires" (Hancock 2009, p. 8).

While the puzzle driving my own research aims to answer a different research question, Hancock's framework must be treated as an important reference point for undertaking a comparison focused on understanding how the presence/absence of a regional "kaleidoscope" has been explained in other cases (Africa; Latin America; Asia).

African and Latin American regionalisms have often been put forward as paradigmatic examples of overlapping regional institutions and processes of regionalisation.

The first attempts at establishing regional projects and frameworks for coordination on the African continent date back to its colonial past: this is one of the reasons why the Organisation of African Unity has been interpreted as more an instrument of national independence than one of regional integration (Acharya 1999). African elites discursively narrated these regional endeavours as a way of distancing the course of national independence from histories of colonialism, apartheid and slavery; nevertheless, the persistence of the colonial past has reverberated in contemporary African regionalism. First, colonial models of governance have been treated as the foundational experience of African regional architecture (Hartmann 2016). Second, the colonial legacy of Westphalian quasi-statehood has been interpreted as a structural constraint for the establishment of effective regional organisations and has influenced the capacity of decolonising states to establish their own systems of regional

interaction (Chappuis et al. 2014). Third, the cohabitation of different colonial powers and modes of colonial administration can be considered to lie at the origins of competing regionalist visions and divergent blocs of states. In the early stages of decolonisation, there were two projects aimed at achieving the Pan-Africanist ideal: whilst one group of leaders envisioned the constitution of the United Nations of Africa, others favoured the establishment of the United States of Africa. Regional fragmentation was fuelled by the difficulty of bridging the Francophone, Anglophone, Lusophone, Arabic blocs of states, especially in the absence of a core regional hegemon and the presence of contending regional leaders (namely, South Africa and Nigeria) (Mattheis 2014).

Finally, consequences of the colonial history of African regionalism can be seen in the proliferation of sovereignty-boosting regional organisations, summitry regionalism and a critical assortment of façade institutions. This proliferation can be interpreted as a result of the fact that African countries are relatively permeable to all sorts of external engineering; alternately, it can be seen as a strategy enacted by African policy-makers to accumulate multiple diplomatic positions, thus strengthening their status and degree of international recognition as well as the reputation of incumbent governments.

Similarly to the African case, Latin American regionalism was originally based on a call for political unity in support of processes of state- and nation-building, processes which therefore ran parallel to the making of the region. The first wave of regionalism was driven by a hegemonic actor—the USA—which had not been a former colonial power; at a later stage, different projects of hemispheric integration, variable geometries of “modular” sub-regionalism and, more recently, open regionalism clashed with one another in the Americas (Bianculli 2016). On the one hand, pan-Americanism has been led by the USA, embodied by the Organisation of the American States, and contested as the latest manifestation of imperialism to which the states of Central and South America have been subjected. On the other hand, Latin America’s emancipation has been pursued through a “Bolivarian”, post-liberal regional vision which is nevertheless multi-headed: in Latin America as in Africa, it is difficult to identify one specific actor leading the area’s multiple regionalising processes. Indeed, each of the regional projects can be considered an effort by a different regional power (through practices of presidential diplomacy) to consolidate its regional leadership or reposition itself globally.



Current regional configurations in the Asian continent also originate from past histories of imperial dominance and alternate waves of colonisation and “re-asianisation” (Jetschke and Katada 2016). To date, the competition between regional leaders and prospective hegemon (China and Japan) as well as between opposing postures vis-à-vis the United States’ role in the continent have prevented any Pan-Asianist project from achieving success; furthermore, the very meaning of “Asia” has been often defined from the outside. Against the background of a post-colonial context, and the region’s exposure to the influence of external actors, several authors (e.g. Acharya 2001) have argued that there is a specific “Asian way” to regionalism: whereas a number of sub-regional structures<sup>34</sup> have emerged over the last decades, the main specificity of Asian regionalism(s) is its model of soft integration in which ideational linkages and collective identities replace regional institutions.<sup>35</sup> This “regionalization-without-regionalism” approach has not prevented the development of some regional projects and initiatives whose hidden agenda might have been the consolidation of hegemonic aspirations or the legitimization of leadership schemes; at the same time, North Asia and Asia-Pacific seem to be at the margins of these regionalising processes.

On the basis of comparison amongst instances of African, Latin American and Asian regionalism, it is possible to draw some parallels vis-à-vis the post-Soviet region and sketch out the features of a post-colonial model of regionalism. Specifically, the latter is primarily characterised by the alternation of colonial powers and the presence of multiple extra-regional actors that ruled over arbitrarily-drawn territorial patchworks.

Regional fragmentation, the impossibility of univocally identifying a region-builder with hegemonic capabilities and ambitions, and unfulfilled projects of statehood are the main legacies of colonial empires in Africa, the Americas and Asia. Though it began from similar conditions, the Asian continent does not appear to be a kaleidoscopic political space in the way African, Latin American and the post-Soviet regions appear to be. In the case of Africa and Latin America, then, instances of post-colonial regionalism have been interpreted by local leaders as emancipatory instruments and a strategy they can employ to be integrated and recognised as peers in the international system.

Turning to the post-Soviet region, one finds some similar traits as well as crucial differences. The most evident analogy concerns its

**Table 2** Central Eurasia's balance of power

	<i>Population</i>		<i>GDP</i>		<i>Defence expenditure</i>		<i>Military expenditure</i>	
	<i>1995</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>2000</i>
Russia	50.54	50.38	91.30	88.52	96.24	93.04	63.03	58.24
Armenia	1.17	1.19	*	*	*	*	2.85	2.51
Azerbaijan	2.63	2.66	*	*	*	*	3.51	4.30
Belarus	3.52	3.50	*	*	*	*	4.24	4.94
Georgia	1.85	1.68	*	*	*	*	n.a.	1.00
Kazakhstan	5.76	5.53	1.49	1.34	*	*	1.99	3.81
Kyrgyzstan	1.54	1.62	*	*	*	*	*	*
Moldova	1.48	1.51	*	*	*	*	*	*
Tajikistan	2.09	2.15	*	*	*	*	*	*
Turkmenistan	1.43	1.53	*	*	*	*	*	1.04
Ukraine	17.40	17.30	3.06	2.36	1.29	1.71	19.90	19.11
Uzbekistan	7.98	8.44	*	1.4	*	*	1.49	3.3

Expressed as percentage of total; \* indicates less than 1%

Source Wohlforth 2004, p. 226

colonial past; however, whilst the other cases involved colonial empires, the Soviet Union has been interpreted as a type of state whose periphery management had some empire-like characteristics. The second dimension to be considered in order to draw parallelisms amongst different regions is the presence/absence of a region-builder, since this constitutes a sign of hegemony or regional leadership. Whereas in the other regions it is not possible to univocally identify such an actor, the former Soviet space is characterised by a clear preponderance of power: Russia's capabilities are actually greater than the sum of the capabilities of all other countries in the "near abroad" (Table 2), and even the strongest regional balancers remain critically dependent on Russia (Table 3).

Post-Soviet regionalisms thus reflect power distribution in the region and the policies of the regionally dominant states, but they have also been effectively defined as "hubless spokes" (Molchanov 2011). Indeed, different centres of gravity developed leading to the multiplication of regional "spokes", but this occurred in the absence of an undisputed regional hub acting as the sole organisational core.

**Table 3** Author's elaboration based on Wohlforth (2004, p. 230)

	<i>High trade dependence on Russia (&gt;30%)</i>	<i>High energy dependence on Russia (&gt;50% and/ or infrastructure)</i>	<i>Russian military base or troops stationed in territory</i>
Belarus	X	X	X
Armenia		X	X
Moldova	X (decreased since 2005)	X	X
Kazakhstan	X		X
Ukraine	X (decreased 2005–2010)	X	X
Kyrgyzstan			X
Tajikistan			X
Georgia		X (decreased since 2006)	X
Turkmenistan			
Azerbaijan		X	X
Uzbekistan			X

#### 4 THE WAY FORWARD

This chapter has provided a review of the main analytical frameworks and conceptual models which have been developed in relation to the post-Soviet region: in other words, I have outlined how the latter has been interpreted and read in different scholarship, either as a case study for broader and more general theories of regionalism or through a closer attachment to an Area Studies perspective.

Second, the chapter has focused on the role played by the “shadow of the past” in shaping how post-Soviet region has been emerging and currently appears. I have explored this process through two main analytical tools: on the one hand, an overall trans-historical analysis, partially drawn from the quite controversial approach proposed by what has been dubbed “imperial comparativism”; on the other hand, I tried to relocate post-Soviet regionalism in an International Relations perspective and consider it as an instance of more fundamental historical phenomena of integration and fragmentation occurring in the international system. The reflection presented in this chapter justifies the frequent move throughout the book to return to the idea of path dependencies.

Third, the chapter has delineated the fundamental research objectives driving this project, including a commitment to a comparative approach which translates into engagement with the diverse strands of literature that have been developed to frame and explain other instances of regionalism.

The following chapter is devoted to the study of one of the peculiarities of post-Soviet regionalism, a specific trait that was uncovered precisely thanks to the above-mentioned comparative endeavour: i.e., the controversial role of Russia, caught between its hegemonic capabilities and ambitions, and its post-colonial condition of a state in the making.

## NOTES

1. In another work, Beissinger (1997) has argued that “empires never really die; at most they fade away. The consequences of empires usually live on for generations beyond their institutional lives” (p. 157). Several authors have reflected on “post-imperial syndromes” (“There is a medical phenomenon in which a person who has had a limb amputated perceives that limb to still be causing pain. The same phenomenon applies to the post-imperial consciousness”, Gaidar 2010, p. XIV); other political scientists have tried to describe the fallout of imperial collapse by looking at post-imperial peripheries and contested sovereignties (Cooley 2000/2001). The phenomenon of imperial wreckage has been effectively addressed by Snyder (1998): “When empires come crashing down, they leave hunks of institutional wreckage scattered across the landscape: pieced of bureaucracies, military units, economic networks, administrative districts, as well as demographic and cultural patterns that bear the marks of imperial past. This detritus of empire constitutes the building blocks of the new political arrangements that are constructed out of the rubble. From these are formed not only new states and nations, but also a whole new system of international and transnational relations amongst the remnants [...] When a child’s edifice assembled from rods and connectors crashes down, the overall structure is destroyed, but tightly interconnected segments of it may retain their shape, though scattered across the floor. When an empire collapse, the still-connected sections may be of several types” (pp. 1–5).
2. It is worth noting that the expression of a normative consonance amongst political actors at the international level is not a specific prerogative of these countries. As a matter of fact, it is not uncommon to observe the formation of international elite cartels, involving elites from different countries who support the positions and policies of other elites: “elite

positioning in these cartels is as important as positioning in the various national power games. Leaders of the cartels' national components consult frequently with each other, borrow freely from each other's policy repertoires, and shore each other up in crises and electoral campaigns" (Higley and Pakulski 2007, p. 18).

3. According to a broad definition, "nesting" occurs when issue-specific institutions are themselves part of wider regional (or multilateral) frameworks that involve multiple states or issues. Overlapping regionalism, instead, entails the coexistence of multiple ordering principles, "systems of rules", "ways of conceiving power" or "sets of practices" to which "actors' dispositions and expectations may respond simultaneously" (Adler and Greve 2009, p. 62).
4. From the Central Asian Commonwealth formed in 1991 to the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation (2002), passing through intermediate steps and chameleonic transformations (such as the Central Asian Union and the Central Asian Economic Community). The Central Asian states attempted to create their own framework of cooperation without including Russia.
5. Moldova and Ukraine were the first to join the Council of Europe in 1995, followed by Russia (1995), Georgia (1999), Armenia and Azerbaijan (2001). Despite not being COE members, Belarus and some of the Central Asian states began participating in some of the COE's initiatives, namely the European Commission for Democracy through Law and the Conference of the Constitutional Control Organs of the Countries of New Democracy.
6. In addition, in 1992 the Economic Cooperation Organisation proceeded with its enlargement to the five Central Asian states and Azerbaijan by establishing a framework for South-Central Asian cooperation; a similar development occurred within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation between 1992 and 1995. Finally, in 1992 the idea of convening a Conference on Interactions and Confidence-building Measures in Asia (which has been dubbed the "Asian OSCE") was put forward by Kazakhstan. The CICA currently gathers together all post-Soviet states except for Moldova.
7. Launched as a cooperative initiative in 1997 by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova, GUAM was institutionalised in June 2001 (Yalta Summit) as a consultative forum. Established in 2005, the Community of Democratic Choice has amongst its founding members Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Azerbaijan holds an observer status.
8. Besides SCO, it is worth mentioning the One Belt, One Road Initiative that is based on the idea of connectivity, investments and infrastructure networks rather than regional institution-building endeavors.

Additionally, several other cooperative frameworks and projects emerged from different regionalist visions, envisaged by a number of regional powers and relevant actors. For example, Iran first proposed—as early as 1991—the establishment of the Caspian Cooperation Organization including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan as well. Any full-fledged integration project amongst the Caspian littoral states has been hindered by the unresolved international legal status of the Caspian Sea; however, several summits have been held and agreements finalized. Another set of integration schemes have been envisioned and partially realized amongst the Black Sea littoral states. The most relevant attempt at regional institutionalisation in the Black Sea region is considered to be the Organization of Black Sea Economic Co-operation (BSEC). In addition to BSEC, the Black Sea littoral states started to cooperate in the field of maritime security through the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (Blackseafor) and the naval operation Black Sea Harmony: both of these initiatives were respectively launched and initiated by Turkey. Similar to projects of region-building in the Caspian Sea, Black Sea regionalist endeavours have also been blocked by two main sources of tensions: on the one side, between Turkey and Armenia, and on the other side between Georgia and Russia. Nevertheless, regional initiatives and projects continue to be launched (the Black Sea Littoral States Border/Coast Guard Cooperation Forum; Black Sea Border Coordination and Information Centre; Confidence and Security Building Measures in the Naval Field in the Black Sea; Border Defence Initiative/Black Sea Border Security Initiative; and the Black Sea Forum for Partnership and Dialogue).

9. The concept of forum shopping has been introduced by International Law scholars to study the behaviour of actors in jurisdictionally compound settings. In International Relations, in addition to forum shopping, similar notions have been developed (i.e. ‘regime shifting’, ‘institutional choice’) (see Helfer 2004; Jupille and Snidal 2005; Busch 2007).
10. Conversely, overlap can result from an unintended path of regional/international institution-building that evolved over time. Some regional organisations end up overlapping with others because of an institutions’ resilience and/or inertia.
11. The reference here is to the fake settlements the Russian nobleman Grigory Potemkin erected along the banks of the Dnieper River in order to please Empress Catherine II during her visit to Crimea.
12. These latter must be distinguished from the colonial empires whose breakup has direct repercussions and serious political effects on the basic state structure and web of internal relations amongst the constituent parts (Barkey and Von Hagen 1997).

13. The Russian Empire does not seem to be a proper term of comparison given the continuity between the tsarist period and the Soviet one, at least in terms of influence and rule over the peripheries and their being subjected to a similar centripetal pull.
14. The first symptoms of weakness had been showed by the war with Russia (1768–1774); then Britain and France absorbed the sultan's main North African territories; and in 1912, the Balkan wars resulted in the Ottoman throwing out of Europe.
15. An interesting perspective about the disintegration of the Soviet Empire has been elaborated by Yegor Gaidar (2010): according to this author, the presence of a scattered nuclear archipelago contained the diffusion of violence in the periphery.
16. Astrid Tuminez's point should be clarified in terms of its specifics, as pre-Soviet instances of statehood have been experienced in the form of kingdoms (i.e. Georgia between the early twelfth and the early thirteenth centuries, referred to as the "Golden Age"), khanates (i.e. Azerbaijan), and principalities (i.e. Moldova). By a similar token, more or less stable types of political order emerged in Central Asia in the form of hybrid polities based on tribal confederations, clannish structures and exchange practices of interdependence between nomadic and sedentary peoples. Pre-Soviet instances of statehood developed in a "global" context of highly variable institutional polymorphism; quite differently, post-Soviet statehood has been inaugurated in a system of states mainly characterized by institutional isomorphism (see Thompson 1991; Ayoub 1995, pp. 73–76; Bremmer and Taras 1996; Stedman and Holloway 2002, pp. 168–171; Kotkin 2007; Neumann and Wigen 2013).
17. For example, mass disorders were registered in Georgia, first in 1956 and later in 1981; in Azerbaijan (1963); in Armenia (1965); in Lithuania (1966); in Tajikistan (1985); in Kazakhstan (1986). In the late 1980s, the ethnic tensions transformed in actual conflicts, especially in Nagorno Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Kyrgyz province of Osh and Transnistria.
18. It is worth mentioning that Abkhazia and South Ossetia did hold the Union Treaty referendum in spite of Georgia's boycott.
19. Between 1989 and 1990, both economic and linguistic autonomy were approved in favour of the Republics, but these instrumental concessions were rather conceived as an attempt to save the Union through limited reforms in the direction of a confederal option. As a matter of fact, the negotiations for the draft of a New Union Treaty also contemplated (March 1991) the acknowledgment of rights of secession and self-determination, the recognition of the declarations of sovereignty proclaimed by the republics and, late on (June 1991) the identification of the Union's constituents unit as "states".

20. In the pre-Soviet period, local leaders tried to form some alignments or groupings; during Soviet times, instead, the Union's strategies for territorialising Soviet rule were implemented through processes of border-making and "National-Territorial Delimitation" (1925–1936) (Hirsch 2005, pp. 163–164).
21. Subsequently, in the late Soviet period, the idea of a North Caucasian republic was revived through the efforts of the Abkhaz National Forum and the first Congress of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus was convened in August 1989 in Sukhumi. The Congress established the Assembly of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, which then evolved into the Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus two years later. Representatives of Georgian social and political movements attended the third congress of the Confederation (Sukhumi, October 1991); on that occasion, a Georgian parliamentary deputy also called for the entire Caucasus to merge to form a "single fist". Nevertheless, the Confederation did not embody the same project of "Caucasiannes" for all components. According to then-president of the Confederation Musa Shanibov, the Confederation was to integrate the peoples of the Caucasus rather than the official governments of the autonomous republics; furthermore, the unification was meant to serve the purpose of resisting attempts to suppress the Caucasus' national-democratic movements. Quite differently, the then-president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria Dzhokhar Dudayev saw the integrative project of uniting the Caucasian people in a confederation as an instrument for achieving independence from Russia. He envisioned the creation of a "Caucasian home" and a Confederation of Caucasian states. Shanibov and Dudayev also diverged on whether to include the Transcaucasian states in the Caucasian union. All in all, the descending trajectory experienced by the Confederation testified to the effectiveness of Soviet rule in devising nationalities on territorial and linguistic principles and dividing them along artificially created ethnic lines. Even though attempts at Caucasian integration had always had an anti-Russian nature, the nationalistic consciousness that prevailed in the post-Soviet period let the Caucasian nations to pursue unification with their co-ethnics rather than Caucasian unity (see Lakoba 1998; Oguz 2004).
22. The second Transcaucasian Federation, instead, was established in 1922 as one of the constituent parts of the newly-established Soviet Union; the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic existed until 1936, at which point it was abolished due to the adoption of the new Soviet Constitution (Bagirova 2007).
23. The pan-Turkic scenario also revived in 1919 after the Bolshevik revolution, when the representatives of the Central Bureau of Muslim Organizations demanded first the establishment of a Soviet Republic of



United Turkistan and then an Autonomous Republic. However, later schemes to form a Central Asian grouping within the Soviet structure were driven by the central administrators. In March of 1921, a resolution by the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party laid out its foundation and two years later, on the occasion of the 1st Economic Conference of Middle Asia, the Middle Asian Economic Union or Middle Asian Federation (*sredazEKOSO*) was established to facilitate the economic integration of the Turkestan, Bukharan and Khorezmian Republics. Whereas the Middle Asian Economic Union was abolished in October 1934, another short-term integrative effort was made through the establishment of a Central Asian Economic Region, set up in February of 1963 and dismantled in December of 1964.

24. See for example Makarychev (2012).
25. “Regionhood” corresponds to the agential capabilities of a region. According to Van Langenhove, there are four conditions needed for a region to act as a polity: (i) the region derives from a system of intentional acts; (ii) the region is a ‘rational’ system with statehood properties; (iii) the region is a reciprocal achievement; and (iv) the region generates and communicates meaning and identity. These four conditions of regionhood imply the existence of a more or less developed institutional framework.
26. According to a constructivist approach to regionalism, as has been argued by Neumann, regions are what region-makers make of them. However, through post-structuralist lenses region-makers can themselves be considered to be constituted by the region-making process. Therefore, not only are regions what region-makers make of them, but also, at the same time, region-makers are what regions make of them (Ferabolli 2014, pp. 22–23).
27. The regional space is mididentified as a primarily geographical unit in which people develop translocal-type relationships; the regional complex emerges through increased social contacts and transactions between groups that develop patterns of economic interdependencies; the regional society is characterized by an increasing level of formalization and/or institutionalization; the regional community displays traits of actorness, as it acquires distinct capabilities, legitimacy and a decision-making structure and can be supported by a regional civil society and regional collective identity; and the region-state is a regionally institutionalised polity born out a group of formerly sovereign national state-based communities that voluntarily decide to transform into a new form of political entity by pooling their sovereignty (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000).
28. Practices have been defined as “socially meaningful actions”; more specifically, they consist of routinized patterns of behaviour organized according to background, implicit or tacit knowledge (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Bueger 2014).

29. Author's interview with Kyrgyz expert (Bishkek, 14 March 2014). The interviewee participated in the group which prepared and chaired the meeting of the Security Council Secretaries for SCO member states as well as the meeting of the Committee of Security Council Secretaries for the CSTO member states, both held in Bishkek in 2007.
30. The presence of informal networks and processes of decision-making appears to be a recurrent characteristic in all countries of the post-Soviet region. However, the coexistence of formal and informal institutions, the presence of mixed organisational systems and practices and the interpenetration of different security, policing and justice providers are not a context-specific, unique trait. Hybrid orders are often found in post-colonial states, where the "rule of the intermediaries [...] substitute[s] and compensate[s] for the lack of authority of the central, legally constituted state and its ability to deliver essential public goods and services" (Scheye 2009, p. 49). Accordingly, hybrid political orders are characterized, for instance, by the persistence of customary non-state institutions of governance and traditional societal structures and authorities (Boege et al. 2009). Similarly, "complex interactions amongst a variety of actors following different animating logics and drawing on varying sources of authority" are to be found in hybrid security orders (Luckham and Kirk 2012, p. 12).
31. Especially in countries where inter-institutional and inter-agency coordination is not always fully established, the "vertical of power" displays unexpected loopholes, and relations between the centre and the peripheries often rest on personal exchanges, patronage networks and clientelistic mechanisms.
32. See for example Le Huérou (2002), Collins (2004), Désert (2007).
33. Members of a multilateral accord delegate policymaking to the wealthiest state amongst them.
34. SEATO; Non-Aligned Movement; Association of South-East Asian Nations; SAARC; East-Asia Summit.
35. The Association of South-East Asian Nations in particular displays an institutional design based on pooling instead of delegation.

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