The Case for Russian and East European Studies

https://www.e-ir.info/2012/09/08/the-case-for-russian-and-east-european-studies/

ANON, SEP 8 2012

Do the collapse of communism and the enlargement of the European Union/NATO undermine the rationale for Russian and East European Studies?

The fall of the Iron Curtain was the beginning of a massive geopolitical change that had also its consequences on the way scientists analysed this region of the globe. The shock wave reached the academic world paired with accusations of failing to predict the unexpected demise of the socialist experiment. The critic against established specialists of the communist states, so called Sovietologists, came also from fellow academicians based in traditional fields of social sciences[1]. As a consequence, the 1990s were the scene of an intense debate over appropriate theories and especially methods used in analysing the post-socialist states. Area studies with their inductive approach found themselves in a defensive position[2]. Despite that over the years the discussion between area studies representatives and discipline specialists subsided, the position of area studies remains under pressure in the academic world.

This essay argues in favour of a strongly established regional study, despite the heterogeneous development among the post-socialist countries. It claims that there is a rational to train students and undertake research specialised in the region with an inductive approach proper to area studies.

The first part of the essay discusses the question of a spatial definition of Russia and Eastern Europe and its implication on research. It argues that a quest for a precise definition is impossible, even undesirable. The second part examines the consequences of this loose definition of space for area studies and presents a non-exhaustive number of fundamental arguments arguing in favour of area studies.

The Area and its Borders: Eventually a Futile Definition

Precisely defining the object of research is part of every scientist's basic work. "From Stettin in the Baltics to Trieste in the Adriatic", the criteria of delimitation as drawn by Churchill at the beginning of the Cold War, was the socialist political and economical system. With the collapse of the Soviet empire, this norm vanished. While the Russian Federation is a recognised entity in regards towards international law, Eastern Europe revels itself as a much fussier unit, the European integration eastwards being only one of the factors of this definitional quagmire.

Different approaches to characterise Eastern Europe emerged through time, often reflecting their author's research agenda or political views. Most famously Kundera (1988) advocated for a return of Central Europe to the European civilisation. The Czech author defined the Orthodox Russian influence as being part of another civilisation[3] and therefore questioning the rational for a common analysis. Mirroring the focus on political science, Wolff (1994) explained Eastern Europe's difference to the western part of the continent by the late development of statehood it had experienced, talking in reference of another non-European region, as being a "semi-Orient". The Economist (2010) represents a contemporary example of how Eastern Europe is defined: it simply ceased to exist as a separate region. With the telling title "Mud, Vodka, chaos and crime? Not anymore" the point is argued that states of Eastern Europe are more dynamic than older EU member states on the Union's southern rim. The anonymous author even proposes an alternative denomination to overcome the negative association with the term Eastern Europe by labelling these countries "ACES" (Advancing Countries of Europe). Whatever the seriousness of the outlined attempts to define

logical unites of analysis, they remain largely unsatisfactory. Such definitions of Eastern Europe are more or less linked to subjective value criteria anchored in a euro-centrist perspective.

However, the primary failure of attempts to seize a fix area of analysis is in the inability to capture other regions of the former Soviet Union, such as the Caucasus and Central Asia, and the specificities they generate in terms of research methodology. The former Soviet Republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia seem to present a double-challenge of analysis nowadays. The political and ideological expansion of the EU and especially energy related factors are driving these countries in the EU's orbit. At the same time however, the pre-Soviet history and contemporary regional dynamics of these regions are profoundly different than the Eastern European or Russian experience. So does it make sense to put all these former Soviet Republics together with Russia and Eastern Europe in the same analytical basket, or would not for example Middle Eastern Studies be more appropriate to cover these regions? The critics of Huntington's (1996) post-socialist civilisation theses have illustrated the problematic in defining large and fix analytical blocs. His division of civilisations along religious or ethnic lines is not only inconsistent, but it also fails to explain the realities on the ground[4]. Finally, theories from Kundera or Huntington are also implying a fix entity from which Eastern Europe or the Eurasian CIS countries could demarcate themselves. But is Russia despite being a state, not a multi-national entity? While for the research on international economic issues for example, counting Russia as a single unit may be suitable, the research on nationality questions across the region might necessitate another theoretical and methodological approach. How can a definitional trap of the region at study be avoided?

A promising approach to this methodological problematic is given by King (2010). He argues that the

"region as an analytical tool depends not on any perennial cultural, historical, or topographical features of the region itself, but rather on the type of question that the analyst chooses to ask" (p. 98).

Such case specific definitions, King claims, are necessary because treating

"all twenty-seven (or more) transition countries as a natural set has an extremely limited benefit. In fact, we have probably already reached the half-life of this particular method."(p. 98)

Advocating for a methodological paradigm beyond a strict geographical definition is justified by a time factor. What was once a unified political entity is evolving in different directions at different speeds. Furthermore King places his method in the logic of a constructivist approach in international relation studies. That a definition of Eastern Europe cannot be objective has been illustrated by Neumann (1998) in his analyse of European identity construction and the role of "the East" for Europe in a process of "othering"[5]. The methodological approach described by King seems nowadays to be the current practice in CREES. Depending on the topic – whether EU integration or Central Asia – the analytical horizon is extended beyond the post-communist countries and includes if necessary useful benchmarks for comparison.

Area studies and its challenges

While it might be argued that methods derived from the research question lead in practice to a fragmentation of area studies, it is not to the disadvantage of this academic modus. As different geographers demonstrated (Anderson, 2009; Knox and Marston, 2006), major processes such as globalisation remain despite their international appearance, locally embedded[6]. Area specialists with their local expertise, cutting across theories, can contribute to a more refined interpretation of these developments. Although experts of narrow social science disciplines might have a theoretical advantage in generalising their findings and addressing larger issues, their deductive approach leads to an important degree of abstraction. Cooper (2000) sees the exchange of area studies and specialised disciplines as a necessary evolution of this academic branch[7]. Therefore the specific skills an area specialist acquires during his training are necessary to complement and challenge concepts elaborated by discipline theorists.

The area studies' aim to understand the dynamics in the post-socialist countries in a holistic way does obviously not reflect the practical possibilities of the work of single scientists. Nevertheless, the concrete demands for solid area studies demand a wider cultural knowledge including language skills. While research becomes specialised in a sub-

region and a discipline in order to be innovative and more than descriptive (unlike Sovietology), teaching needs to maintain a larger approach to area studies. The Nuffield Language Enquiry in 2000 portrayed a decline of Russian language programmes among UK universities (Hutchings). Such an evolution leads not only to the decline of art-type Russian programmes, but also to the inability to provide social science students with the necessary language skills for in-depth examination of the post-soviet space. Certainly Russian is not the lingua franca it used to be, but still remains on of the most practical options to access non-English, regional sources without overloading the curriculum of undergraduate or master students. However, learning and using truly local languages for research purposes represents a qualitative potential for research in the future.

The constant challenges that area studies face in renewing themselves, is illustrated by the widely discussed role of legacies. The last few years have seen a small but noticeable shift in economic and political science towards the analysis of all sorts of legacies. Even though the analytical category of legacies lacks of consistent theory and seems to be used accordingly loose (Cooper, 2010), this sensitiveness for the importance of the historical context lead to an increase in institutionalist scholarships[8]. Including contextualised analyses is now even present in international bodies such as the World Bank, which appoints anthropologists and other area specialists to obtain a bottom-up perspective of problems. On the other hand, legacies might be over-interpreted and the more recent experiences overlooked. At first, the study of legacies seems to be made for area specialist, but the danger of falling back on a narrow regional interpretation should be considered.

Conclusions

Contemporary Russian and East European area studies moved beyond descriptive methods consolidating mythic views such as portrayed by Tyutchev's or Churchill's famous quotes about Russia[9]. Producing credible and cutting-edge research, resulted in an increased use of social science theories produced by discipline experts as well as the specialisation and fragmentation of area studies in smaller regional and topical entities. Indeed this trend seems to be salutary for the survival of area studies. But at the same time, a broad based teaching should not neglect the specific assets of our field: regional or local language skills and the critical mind-set of inductive methodology, so important not only for our research area, but academia in general.

Bibliography

Anderson, J. (2009) Understanding Cultural Geography: Places and Traces. Routledge.

Bunce, V. (1995) Should Transitologists Be Grounded? Slavic Review, 54: (1): 111-127.

Büscher, W. (2004) Berlin- Moskau: Eine Reise zu Fuß. Rowohlt-Taschenbuch-Verlag.

Connolly, R. (2009) Economic Structure and Social Order Development in Post- Socialist Europe. PhD, University of Birmingham.

Cooper OBE, J. (2000) A future for Russian and East European Area Studies? Bulletin of Ost-Europa Institut Berlin, 15.

Cooper OBE, J. (2010) "Legacies of the Communist (and pre-Communist) Past – Some Thoughts". Center for Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham.

The Economist (2010) "Farewell to eastern Europe – Mud, vodka, chaos and crime? Not any more ". The Economist Group. London.

Hanson, S. (2009) "The contribution of Area Studies". In Landman, T. & Robinson, N. (Eds.) The SAGE handbook of comparative politics. SAGE 159-174.

Huntington, S.P. (1996) The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Hutchings, S. Russian studies in UK universities. http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/386 [Accessed 05.03.2012].

King, C. (2010) Extreme politics: nationalism, violence, and the end of Eastern Europe. Oxford University Press.

Knox, P.L., Marston, S.A. and Nash, A.E. (2006) Human Geography : Places and Regions in Global Context. Pearson Education Canada.

Kundera, M. (1984) The Tragedy of Central Europe. New York Reviews of Books, 31: (7).

Ledeneva, A.V. (2006) How Russia really works : the informal practices that shaped post-Soviet politics and business. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Neumann, I.B. (1999) Uses of the other: the “East” in European identity formation. Manchester University Press.

North, D.C., Wallis, J.J., Webb, S.B., et al. (2007) Limited Access Orders in the Developing World: A New Approach to the Problems of Development. SSRN eLibrary.

Saxonberg, S. and Linde, J. (2003) Beyond the Transitology – Area Studies Debate. Problems of Post-Communism, 50: (3): 3-16.

The World Bank (2011) Social Analysis at the World Bank. http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTSOCIALDEV/0,,menuPK:3177455~pagePK:64168427~piPK:64168435~theSitePK:3177395,00.html[Accessed 12.03.2012].

Wilkinson, C. (2009) Interpreting Security: Grounding the Copenhagen School in Kyrgyzstan. University of Birmingham.

Wolff, L. (1996) Inventing Eastern Europe: the map of civilization on the mind of the enlightenment. Stanford University Press.

Zürcher, C. (2007) The post-Soviet wars: rebellion, ethnic conflict, and nationhood in the Caucasus. New York University Press.

[1] See Hanson (2009) and Saxonberg (2003) for an overview of the critic.

[2] See Bunce (1995)

[3] A similar view can be attributed to Churchill. While defining the dividing line of the Iron Curtain, he continued in his famous speech by talking of “the historical cities of Central and Eastern Europe” in reference to the capitals of these countries. While at the same time the political system was acknowledged to separate Europe, the region therefore remained part of a European civilisation in his view.

[4] An example of such oversimplification could be his interpretation of conflicts between the Christian and Muslim world. In the case of the Caucasian wars, it has been demonstrated that religion played only a secondary role at first. In the ongoing conflicts, despite being a mobilisation factor, religion is closely dependent on clan and tribe structures for instance (see Zürcher, 2007).

[5] Not only social scientist have illustrated this fact. A very telling account in the research for “the East”, is the account by the German author Büscher (2004) of his journey on foot from Berlin to Moscow. Like an absconding horizon, being in “the East” was never recognised by the local people he met, illustrating the relative definition of this term.

[6] The normative interactions between the processes on the global and local scale are referred to as “glocalisation”.

See Knox and Marston (2006).

[7] Examples of such contributions by area specialists are Zürcher (2007) and Wilkinson (2009). The former verifies and challenges established conflict theories with a detailed case study of post-soviet wars in the Caucasus. The latter's PhD work in critical security studies focuses on the Kirgiz people's perception of security. While using established theories, it necessitates a broader knowledge about the region people live in as well as the language they use to express their perceptions.

[8] See North et al. (2007) for a theory of the role of institutions. Connolly (2009) for a practical application in the study of post-socialist economies; Ledeneva (2006) for a study of informal practices and institution in contemporary Russia.

[9] Tyutchev: "Russia cannot be understood with the mind alone / No ordinary yardstick can span her greatness / She stands alone, unique / In Russia, one can only believe". Churchill: "Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma".

—

Written by: author name withheld
Written at: University of Birmingham, Centre for Russian and East European Studies
Written for: Dr. Katarina Wolczuk
Date written: December 2011

About the author:

The author/s of this content have been verified by E-international Relations, but wish to remain anonymous.