



### **Johannes Heisig: Aspects of Globalisation in the Successor States of the Soviet Union**

Whenever people discuss the phenomenon of globalisation, they may be talking about numerous regions of the world but not about the successor states of the Soviet Union or some parts of Eastern Europe – a region which, since the fall of the UdSSR, has degenerated into an accumulation of chaotic societies in which the old leading elites, together with their train of favourites, have merely doffed their ideological shirt but not lost their power.

The old political and economic power blocks have survived up to the present day, even though their ruling skills vary from country to country. Thus, in Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko preserves the command economy by means of a bureaucratic dictatorship, while in Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev directs the feudalist power circle like a family-owned enterprise. No matter where you look in the region, hopes for a democratic transformation remain unanswered.

After decades of communist despotism, great things were expected from a liberal democracy with a market economy; however, the citizens of the countries concerned lacked the power to form strong civil societies. Thus, 'hybrid' systems comprising elements of both democracy and dictatorship emerged, which served charismatic personalities with a power base in the army, the security forces, and the bureaucracy as a stepping stone to the presidency. Once they are in office, they all, even today, make provisions to retain their power, like the Russian president, Mr Putin, who disempowered the country's Federation Council and the Duma, rendered the foundation of new political parties more difficult, and greatly limited the areas in which potential challengers might distinguish themselves.

To be sure, globalisation enabled people all over the world to participate in the spread of new ideas and to obtain access to information. However, the inadequate availability of the internet and a defective command of English hamper segments of the population that are not formally educated in actually making use of the possibilities associated with globalisation. The educated, on the other hand, particularly those in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, use the globalisation of the movement of capital, for example, to transfer their profits to the West, visit exclusive health resorts there, and send their children to study at renowned Western universities. This way, their wealth does safeguard their own leadership, but it does certainly not promote the implementation of democratic ideas in their own countries.

In the extended region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, globalisation has numerous aspects that are worth a closer look. One of them is the economy. In the territory of the former Soviet Union, national economies were subsistence-oriented and their trade relations with the rest of the world made up only a few percent of their overall productivity. Thus, the shock therapy caused harm and yielded fresh opportunities at the same time: On the one hand, the Soviet Union's domestic market broke down, while on the other, the new worldwide convertibility of currencies brought the advantage of low factor and labour costs.

For about one decade, Russia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and to some extent even Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have been transforming into commodity exporters – in response to the apparently endless transformation crisis. Especially in this field, the Eurasian countries have an advantage over the countries in the Middle East, as they are not forced to use ships but have the option of transporting their exports by land directly to the importing countries. However, this cuts both ways: On the one hand, the export of raw materials allows billions of dollars to flow into the treasuries; on the other, the dangers and consequences are so grave that there is no question of an end to the 'failed transformation'. What is more, the population itself hardly benefits from these profits. Instead of using them to support social services, governments invest in armaments, the expansion of the raw-material sector, and the repurchase of private raw-material companies.

The Eurasian national economies, some of them globalising for the second time, clearly feel the risks of their expansion. As international prices are fixed at the central commodity exchanges, they are troubled by the soaring profits and subsequent price slumps that are associated with speculative bubbles and wars. What is more, the natural disasters arising from the climate change lead to a panicky reorganisation of the energy supply.

As the economic power of the oil-based economies with a specifically Russian character remains confined to business conglomerates controlled by the state, the new economic trend does nothing to promote civil society, the development of democracy, or an awareness of the need for equity. The population is indeed powerless. The bullying of civil-society organisations by the state and the murders of unpopular journalists speak for themselves.

Those national economies that rely on oil and gas are a negative factor of globalisation in political terms, too. The hybrid regimes have consolidated themselves and, as those in power fear losing their influence, a fair competition for democratic posts is impossible. Nevertheless, the elites use the institutions of democracy to demonstrate the legitimacy of their power to the outside world. And as the West does not press for the democratisation of those hybrid regimes because its own foreign-policy interests outweigh its emphasis on ideals, these regimes are free to continue along the present lines without interference.

In Eastern Europe and Eurasia, another type of political globalisation was bearing fruit years ago in revolutions that adorned themselves with the name of the rose or the lily, or the colour orange. Whereas Europe did not have any influence on the enforced exits of Mr Shevardnadze, Mr Akayev, and Mr Kuchma, the US actively supported these coups inter alia through the Soros Foundation and the Open Society Institute. It may be said that the engagement of the US did not necessarily lead to the democratisation of the countries mentioned, but it did effect a rapprochement between them and the US.

Another aspect of globalisation is the commitment of the churches. Now that other Christian churches have started to intrude into its territory, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is deeply worried. At the time of the symbiosis of tsarism and orthodoxy, the church did not know the meaning of tolerance, and during communism it fought for its life. After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the ROC hoped to be able to re-establish itself in Russia, Belarus, and the Ukraine – to continue, in fact, the tradition of the tsarist era. When, however, Catholicism and Protestantism started to denounce social and political abuses and the people living in Catholic or Protestant communities experienced a worldly church which demanded that the state act justly, this was an attack on the self-image of orthodoxy, which supported and legitimised the state. By now, denominational pluralism is striking roots in the region, especially as the missionary efforts of the Catholics and the Protestants are successful.

What is stable is the situation between orthodoxy and Islam; there is hardly any fluctuation. The deterrent effect of Islamic fundamentalism, which has numerous followers in many of the East European and Central Asian states, has so far prevented orthodox believers from defecting to Islam in large numbers.

HIV/AIDS proves itself a genuine phenomenon of globalisation. Thanks to the fact that mobility has increased in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the disease spread quickly, infecting c. 50 million people. In the Soviet Union, which was isolated from the outside world, as well as in its satellite states, AIDS was practically unknown. Since 1989, however, the virus has been threatening to trigger a region-wide pandemic. Its causes include drug consumption or, in more concrete terms, addicts taking opium and its derivatives using contaminated needles, as well as the high infection rate among prostitutes, the widespread refusal of safer sex, and the social taboo on the subject of HIV/AIDS.

Furthermore, tuberculosis is on the increase again in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the reasons for this being overcrowded prisons and the prevalence of HIV. In Russia, about 30,000 people died from Tbc in 2001 alone, while in the US, fewer than 800 died in the same period. A solution to this problem cannot be expected in the near future.

And finally, there is the transnational sex business. Eastern Europa and Central Asia offer golden opportunities to transnationally organised pimps and human traffickers. Plunged into misery by social changes, millions of women, who in general have a qualified education and know foreign languages, either follow feigned western job offers or are forced into prostitution in western Europe, even in Germany, with the most severe consequences for themselves.

There is no doubt that the effects globalisation has on the people in Eastern Europe and Central Asia are multifaceted. However, those who profit from this development are only the powerful, the wealthy, and the *nouveaux riches*, whereas the poor majority of the population sees only the downside. As power is mainly concentrated in the executive, and as there is no stable middle class to demand democratisation, there are hardly any chances of establishing greater justice in the state in the foreseeable future. The democratic states of the West, on the other hand, could exert an important influence on developments in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Should their engagement materialise and be successful, the West's own need for military reassurance would not be the least issue to lose much of its importance.