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## Editorial: political geographies of the post-Soviet union -a farewell to *Eurasian Geography and Economics* from the editors

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With this special issue on “Political Geographies of the Post Soviet Union,” two of the journal’s editors take their leave. We (John O’Loughlin since 2002 and Ralph Clem since 1995) have long been associated with *Eurasian Geography and Economics* (*EGE*), first as authors and later as editors. Clem was trained as a “geographer of the Soviet Union” in the renowned program in the Geography Department at Columbia University and the Harriman Institute under the tutelage of Robert Lewis. At the time, Soviet geographic study was a discipline in opacity, guided more by educated guessing based on negligible data sources and minimal information about a closed society. *Soviet Geography: Review and Translation* (founded in 1960) by the former owner of the journal, Victor H. Winston and under the editorship of Theodore Shabad, provided both a remunerative outlet for Soviet scholars and a keyhole into the murkiness of the Soviet world. (For a fuller account of the journal’s genesis and evolution as well as the boundless energy and ebullience of its former owner, see Bond and Clem (2016). O’Loughlin came to the journal as a political geographer without this regional specialty when his field-based research in the post-Soviet regions around the Black Sea and in the Caucasus became possible after the implosion of the Soviet Union, facilitated and energized by his close Russian colleague, Vladimir Kolosov.

Both of us were dragooned into editorial roles by Winston. We trust that we served as a bridge between a journal that reflected the temperament and proclivities of its owner/editor for strongly empiricist and up-to-date papers in economic, population, and urban geography to a more inclusive academic outlet more broadly representing contemporary developments in human geography, integrating theoretical considerations with data analysis. As part of the transition, we sought to build on the journal’s base of established specialists and bring in

younger scholars, especially those from outside the United States, with interests in subjects not previously included the journal's purview.

Expanding the journal geographically (from post-Soviet countries to all of Eurasia in 2002) and disciplinary (to bring in economics in 1996) has had both benefits and costs. The main benefit to the journal, authors, and readers is that *EGE* now has a broader remit and a commensurate readership and appeal. To facilitate this, we approved a series of special issues on themes of interest not only to our traditional readership but to a broader audience within the social sciences as well. As a result, we have published dozens of papers on the rapidly changing geographic landscape in China and multiple key papers on the macroeconomics of Chinese and Russian transitions from Communist to (controlled) capitalist markets. The downside is the tactical de-emphasis on regional geography that appealed to the specialists but was seen as limiting in a discipline that had evolved to more nomothetic approaches over the past 50 years. For the past decade, *EGE* has attempted to straddle the idiographic-nomothetic divide by advocating for a "new regional geography" advocated by Murphy and O'Loughlin (2009), one that is both territorial and relational/networked.

### **Special issue on the political geographies of the post-Soviet union**

The papers in this special issue reflect the "new regional geography" that additionally should promote research attention from geographers to significant contemporary political subjects and dilemmas. Stated as "research whose scope extends beyond disciplinary boundaries to embrace current public and political debate" (Murphy and O'Loughlin 2009, 241), such work is now increasingly expected by the public as well as funding agencies and academic institutions as part of the responsibility of scholars. Presenting an interesting and rich in detail local account is significantly enhanced if the author(s) also connect the article's message to two wider audiences: in the public-political where matters are debated and often hotly contested and in the academic where researchers seek empirical verification of (sometimes hyperbolic) theoretical declarations.

In that spirit, the regions covered in the five papers vary from the city-scale of Moscow to the country-wide analysis of Georgia but also include regional accounts of the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, the North Caucasus region of Russia, and the four post-Soviet *de facto* republics of Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transdnistria, and Abkhazia. Topically, within the field of political geography, the papers can be grouped into two categories. The "geographies of conflict" group has papers elaborating in detail on three ongoing clashes, two of which have seen large-scale violence (the Donbas and in the North Caucasus). The third paper, reporting struggles between community groups and the city authorities around the construction of religious edifices in Moscow, is non-violent but certainly intense in the nature of its local antagonisms. The two papers that can be grouped in their individual interests in the topic of state- and nation-building in the Caucasus-Black

Sea region both portray the evolution of local political geographies from Soviet to contemporary eras, one through the lens of elections and the other through the views of local people about the political and cultural icons of their new republics. All of the papers are exemplars of what Gerard Toal (2017) has called for – a “thick geopolitics” that can contest and supersede the glib and evidence-free “thin geopolitics” that characterizes so much of Western commentary on events in Russia and its Near Abroad. A “thick geopolitics” that is aware of regional and international scalar effects on local developments can be political geographers’ Holy Grail and a welcome antidote to broad brush generalizations of other social sciences and anecdotal descriptions from journalists.

The first conflict paper by Ralph Clem (2017) tackles the seemingly impossible task of parsing and evaluating the evidence from an active war zone. With massive amounts of news, both real and fake, emanating from the various conflict protagonists and their supporters especially in the realm of social media, it can be extremely difficult to evaluate claims and counterclaims. But close examination of social media use by war participants can also produce clear and convincing evidence of military actions, as was documented for the use of a Russian missile in shooting down Malaysia Airlines 17 over the Donbas war zone in July 2014 (Toal and O’Loughlin 2017). Despite such evidence, television audiences differ greatly in their views and information sources about such spectacular events. Clem’s article takes a broader view and examines a wider variety of the information on the Donbas conflict to show the evidence for Russian trans-border aggression despite official denials from the Kremlin. The conclusions of this and other works on the Ukraine conflict do not rely on official sources, nor even on journalists on the ground, presaging a development that marks the new era of conflict analysis.

In contrast to the reliance on social media information, the study of the recent developments in the North Caucasus conflicts by Holland, Witmer, and O’Loughlin (2017) uses information sources that appear in the usual newspapers and press reports to document the trends. The North Caucasus region has been characterized by conflicts since the early post-Soviet years of the 1990s, but political developments related to the Kremlin management of the region’s economy and security that rely on the partnership with Ramzan Kadyrov, president of the Chechen Republic, have dampened down the conflicts considerably and pushed the flashpoints away from Chechnya to Dagestan especially. The level of attacks on Russian forces might be predicted to be negatively correlated with the amount of federal spending (subsidies) in the local area, but the analysis in this article does not support this expectation. It is not at all evident that the significant Kremlin largess reaches the pocketbooks of the residents of the area.

The Todd (2017) article is about a different kind of conflict geography, though the potential for social protest escalating to violence in Moscow over access to public spaces and control of public expenditures cannot be ruled out. Both the Russian Orthodox church and the Muslim communities have tried to build edifices in the city to serve the burgeoning numbers who attend the respective services in

the atmosphere of religious freedom that is now (since the 1997 Law on Religious Freedom) guaranteed by the Russian state. The tiny number of mosques vastly underserves the Muslim observant, and efforts to build new structures have been met with solid resistance from neighborhood groups and the official authorities. By contrast, the number of churches is growing rapidly, but new building proposals sometimes run into competing claims on scarce public sites for parks and other uses. Todd shows, using an ethnographic approach, how citizen groups have differential access to the political process and achieve different rates of success in a tightly controlled political environment.

State-making and nation-building in the post-Soviet years continues for both formal *de jure* and unrecognized *de facto* republics. Georgia is one of the most democratic states (after the Baltic republics now in the European Union) that emerged after the 1991 Soviet implosion. Though its internal political turmoil has eased and its geopolitical orientation toward the West and away from Russia is now almost irreversible, its electoral map is quite unstable and unpredictable. Sichinava (2017) shows the slow emergence of a Western-style electoral geography with the beginnings of consistent (election to election) levels of support for parties that are less personalized and more ideological. Building government structures and confidence in a democratic model not only requires fair electoral procedures but it is also promoted by stable parties/coalitions and support bases. Existing ethnic and social cleavages in Georgia are reflected in electoral preferences and a resulting geographic polarization is visible on the maps.

The last paper in the special issue, by O'Loughlin and Kolosov (2017), returns to a nation-building and neglected area of research in political geography – that of the role of symbolism in promoting loyalty to and identification with new political units. In the case of *de facto* states, unrecognized by almost all members of the international community, ensuring the support of the existing populations through both provision of public goods and reliance on the continued support of the patron (Russia in these post-Soviet cases; Bakke et al. 2018) is matched by promotion of local icons. The article shows a mixed picture of success in this regard since political and cultural figures from earlier Tsarist and Soviet eras are still strongly present in all republics. Only Nagorno-Karabakh has successfully complemented state-building with recognition of locals as major symbolic players in their nation-building, while residents of Transdnistria at the opposite pole still identify strongly with the Soviet heritage. Abkhazia and South Ossetia show a mixed local and Russian/Soviet heritage and attachments.

### **And the future?**

The new editorial team will set out their stall in the first issue of the 2018 volume, and the journal will now take its lead from their direction and their sense of what key topics across the vast Eurasian region should draw the attention of geographers and economists. The journal has been slowly moving to publish papers

in environmental subjects, including human–environment interactions, and this could be expected to continue. Social topics that generate a lot of political fallout, such as international refugee flows, can be expected to receive increased consideration. Under the ownership of Victor Winston, the journal generally avoided politically sensitive and controversial subjects, as he deemed them outside the bounds of objective academic work. But the divide between the topics that engage and energize the public of the various countries and the academic world is growing ever more translucent, and like other journals in geography and the social sciences, *Eurasian Geography and Economics* needs to pay attention to these subjects, regardless of how difficult they are to research or to resolve.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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