

BOOK REVIEW:

Minakov, Mikhail (2024). *The Post-Soviet Human. Philosophical Reflections on Post-Soviet History*. Kyiv: Laurus – Milano: Kowŋ

Olexandr Starukh

The National Preserve "Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra"
ORCID: 0009-0009-8284-607X

Mikhail Minakov's book deals with transformational processes in the post-communist countries of the former USSR from the late 1980s to 2022. Analyzing a variety of material, the author acts not only as a historian but also as a philosopher, sociologist, and political analyst, giving depth to the research. The book is an essential contribution to understanding post-communist communities and their evolution in a rapidly changing world. The work raises complex issues of emancipation of the peoples of the former USSR. The reader is offered a broad description of various concepts that have attempted to understand the essence of transformational processes. It is not just a scientific study but an invitation to a dialogue about the future of the countries of the region in the face of global challenges. And there is no chance of not accepting such an invitation.

When analyzing the history of the recent past, it is impossible to avoid contradictions and personal projections. After all, most readers have their own experience and understanding of this period. At the same time, a modernity researcher is always included in ongoing processes and, therefore, is in a bubble of his or her own experience. Apparently, feeling this, the author ironically refers to his own work as a "testament of a post-Soviet person".

The central idea of the study is the definition of 'post-Soviet human' as a general "designation of several generations of people and societies whose collective experiences of self-improvement were associated with the destruction of the Soviet social world and the revolutionary attempt to create new social worlds" (p. 29). The author also attempts to conceptualize the post-Soviet period based on understanding history as a combination of continuity and caesura (p. 30).

In the introduction, the author defines the scope of the study, emphasizing that the post-Soviet era ended in 2022 with the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which was a decisive blow to the post-Soviet order. In the author's opinion, it is from this moment that the post-Soviet period can be considered a completed period and become a subject for scientific research. The post-Soviet era has clear chronological outlines, starting with the destructive-creative processes of 1989–1991 and ending with the tragic events of 2022.

The book is dedicated to a post-Soviet human who has distinguished himself in creating new social worlds and political systems. The author seeks to explore how this

human used the opportunities that appeared to him after 1991 for self-expression and political creativity.

The book is written in three languages and has a structure that includes philosophical reflection, a description of the stages of development of post-Soviet peoples, an idea of the post-Soviet transition, and a summary of democratic and autocratic achievements. The book also examines the lessons of the post-Soviet experience that may be useful for the times to come.

In the first part of the study, the author defines the philosophical aspects of post-Soviet history. In particular, the central category of the study is the “post-Soviet person.” In his understanding, the post-Soviet person is a cultural and anthropological type formed between 1991 and 2022, when significant social, political, and economic changes occurred in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia. This type of person emerged from the experience of self-improvement associated with the destruction of the Soviet social world and the attempt to create a new social reality. This person is characterized by the ability to be creative and destructive, manifested in his desire for freedom, individuality, and new beginnings.

According to the author, this person lives in conditions of constant change, where the struggle for new opportunities and fear of them defines his existence. Post-Soviet human faces contradictions between democratic aspirations and authoritarian tendencies, between the desire to achieve economic freedom and the risks of oligarchic control. Such a person is a witness and participant in historical caesuras that shape new political and social realities and his or her experience is essential for understanding contemporary societies in the region.

Thus, the author concludes that a post-Soviet person is not just an individual but a representative of an entire generation trying to find its place in a changing world and realize its potential in the face of new challenges and opportunities.

This person does not exist in a vacuum but in reality. And the ontology of his existence is characterized by four main features, which the author calls the “post-Soviet tetrad”, which shape his socio-economic and cultural-political context:

1. *Democratization* – a process that directs the political creativity of post-Soviet societies toward building new political cultures and systems based on the separation of powers, the rule of law, and human rights.
2. *Marketization* – the transformation of the economy, which involves the transition to market relations, the privatization of state property, and the creation of an entrepreneurial class that supports the market economy.
3. *Nationalization* – the process of forming new nation-states, accompanied by the search for identity and the struggle between ethnic and civic nationalisms.
4. *Europeanization* – regional integration aimed at harmonizing political, legal, and economic systems, which aims to ensure peaceful coexistence between Eastern and Western European countries.

These four trends, traditionally used to characterize this period in the region's development, interact and shape the complex and contradictory nature of post-Soviet development.

The book's second part examines the logic of development and identifies the stages of the post-Soviet era, which the author additionally qualifies as "interwar".

According to the author, the post-Soviet period began with the caesura of 1989–1991 and ended in 2022, when the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine started. During this time, the political communities that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union went through five stages.

The first stage (1989–1991) is associated with the emergence of the tendencies that made up the post-Soviet tetrad and the opening of opportunities for political creativity. The second stage (1992–1994) was a time of realization of revolutionary opportunities when new power elites began to form new states and economic projects. The third stage (1995–2000) was characterized by stabilizing new political and economic systems when the ex-Soviet population had to accept new conditions of existence. The fourth stage (2001–2008) allowed the post-Soviet peoples to assess the results of their development but also led to an intensification of the power struggle. The last stage (2008–2022) manifested itself in strengthening autocratic tendencies and conflict between post-Soviet countries.

The author identifies specific features that define each of these stages. The first stage was characterized by destructive-creative processes that led to the collapse of the Soviet order. The second stage was a time of formation of new states and search for rules of coexistence. The third stage was a moment of stabilization when new political systems began to be institutionalized. The fourth stage turned out to be a period of assessment of achievements but also exacerbated contradictions between different political forces. The last stage demonstrated the growth of authoritarianism and conflict, leading to the end of the post-Soviet period.

Such periodization undoubtedly has a certain logic and the right to exist. At the same time, conflicts between countries began during the collapse of the USSR. They had their own logic of confrontation when the former imperial center created local conflicts within new communities to ensure its control and influence.

Thus, in the author's opinion, the post-Soviet interwar era consists of five stages, each with its own characteristic features, reflecting the complex transition process from the Soviet past to new social and political realities. These stages demonstrate how post-Soviet societies tried to adapt to new conditions while preserving elements of the Soviet legacy and facing new challenges.

In the book's third part, the author examines the main concepts and ideas used in the assessment of transformation processes. The essence of the evolution of ideas presented in the third chapter lies in the transformation of the perception of the post-Soviet era and its impact on the societies of Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia. The author emphasizes that history not only moves in continuous intervals but is also shaped through narrative practices that reflect changes in public consciousness.

At the beginning of the post-Soviet period, visions of the future were optimistic, with hopes for democratization and economic progress. However, these hopes clashed with harsh reality over time, leading to disappointment.

The evolution of ideas also reflects changes in scientific approaches to studying the post-Soviet transit. Initially, optimistic concepts dominated, but researchers began to pay attention to the real problems that post-Soviet societies faced over time. It led to a critical review of previous ideas and the formation of new theories that consider the complexity and multifaceted nature of the post-Soviet experience.

Thus, the evolution of perceptions in the third chapter demonstrates how changes in the political, social, and economic context have influenced perceptions of the post-Soviet era, shaping new perspectives for understanding its consequences and challenges. Among the authors who study the post-Soviet transit and form the main context for understanding the post-Soviet era, its challenges and opportunities, as well as its impact on modern societies in the region are Oleg Havrylyshyn, Natalia Panina and Yevhen Holovakha, Charles Fairbank, and Pavlo Kutuyev.

The final, fourth part identifies the “fruits of post-Soviet political creativity”. This part examines the post-Soviet era as a period characterized by vivid, dramatic events in the lives of the peoples of Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia. The author emphasizes that the results of these processes are of critical importance for understanding the fragility of democratic achievements and the infrastructure of peace in the region. During the post-Soviet era, communities experienced stages associated with restoring statehood, ideological pluralism, competitive politics, and social inclusion, where freedom and subordination, democratic creativity, and authoritarian innovation coexisted.

The author attempts to balance the achievements of post-Soviet nations in the context of democratic political creativity, noting that the main achievements were new states with distributed power, political and legal systems guided by the principles of the rule of law, strong parliaments, autonomous courts, multi-party systems, free media, and active civil society. However, alongside these achievements, the post-Soviet period also proved to be a time of authoritarian political creativity, where many individuals and communities wasted their potential on institutions that were subservient to ruling groups and disregarded political freedom.

Thus, post-Soviet political creativity manifests itself in the complex balance between democratic and authoritarian tendencies that shape the socio-political structures of the region. The author emphasizes that the post-Soviet period became a time not only for the destruction of old orders but also for the creation of new ones, which requires critical reflection and analysis, especially in the context of recent events that led to the end of this era.

Thus, Mikhail Minakov, in his study, emphasizes the unprecedentedness of the “post-Soviet” era, which opened up opportunities for personal freedom and collective emancipation in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia. The author points out that the evolution of 1991 did not require victims comparable to those during the Civil War, although the collapse of the USSR and the caesura of 1989–1991 led to significant losses.

Those who survived received opportunities that their ancestors were deprived of, but post-Soviet human could not justify hopes, which led to disappointment. However, the author himself did not compare the consequences of the period of the millennium transition with the time of the collapse and subsequent consolidation of the empire in 1917-1922, which was retouched in the historiography of the USSR times in the term “civil war”. Perhaps the positive consequences for some “post-Soviet” peoples, as the author claims, will be slightly exaggerated. Depopulation, degradation of the social system, infrastructure, scientific sphere, and technological level of development have taken on a considerable scale, and the exceptions that have occurred only confirm the general trend.

The continuation of the strengths of any work is its contradictions and aspects that can be considered debatable. They are also present in Mikhail Minakov's book, so it is worth briefly outlining them.

In his research, the author consistently defines a geographic region as “Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia.” The boundaries of these regions are not universally accepted. In the fourth chapter, when the author analyzes the achievements of democratic creativity of the “post-Soviet peoples”, three different categories of states are analyzed: Estonia, an EU country; Russia and Ukraine, two countries that, according to the new definition of some authors, are qualified as Eastern European and North Eurasian; and Uzbekistan, which does not belong to this region and is a country in Central Asia. Therefore, the geographical dimension of the “post-Soviet region” applied by Mikhail Minakov should be clarified or redefined.

Another point of discussion is the definition of the chronological boundaries of the study. There is no doubt that there is logic in the framework: 1989–2022. However, the Russian-Ukrainian war began with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Georgia faced such a situation in 2008, and Moldova faced it in the early 1990s. And at the same time, the escalation of the war in 2022 between the two largest Slavic countries in the world has changed little for the countries of Central Asia. The Russian-Ukrainian war is not over yet, so we are dealing with an unfinished process that may make assessments premature.

The very concept of “post-Soviet” can be considered debatable. The author himself discusses its shortcomings. In our opinion, there is an urgent need to replace it. Is it appropriate to use the ideologized term of the Cold War era, adding the particle “post-”? The concept itself contains a vagueness and confusion in its content. It has its roots in the idea of the “Soviet people” – an ideological construct from the distant 1939 that was never fully realized, so in order to be “post-Soviet”, it must first be “Soviet”.

If we formally analyze the roots of “(post)Soviet” – “councils” (“soviets”), we will see that they had a formal meaning in the old (USSR-era) system of power because the communist party governed all spheres of life. Instead, since 1991, the party has disappeared in the new coordinate system, and the “councils” as bodies of government not only remained but also transformed and began to acquire a new meaning. And today, for example, in Ukraine, the government can formally be qualified as “Soviet”, that which is based on “councils”: from the sole legislative body – the Verkhovna Rada [Supreme Council] of Ukraine, to the self-governing body of the territorial community – the

community council. Therefore, formally, the modern citizen of Ukraine is completely “Soviet”, without the prefix “post-”, although not communist at all. This is a different “Sovietness,” as in principle, the Sovietness of the 1920s and 1930s, 1950s, and 1980s differed.

The question also arises whether it is appropriate to speak of a “Soviet Ukrainian” and a “Soviet Estonian” during the USSR. As is known, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics consisted of 15 national republics, the national (ethno-cultural) component being the only reliable one in the name. After all, it was not precisely a Union (but rather an empire) and not always a republic (because it was not the people who ruled, but the party), but the definition of “socialism” is rather the subject of a serious “theological” dispute. Maybe it’s time to eliminate the old ideological definitions and move on to another, perhaps purely geographical definition? Mikhail Minakov’s book actually “pushes” towards such a discussion.

A number of the author’s thoughts also attract attention. Despite the opportunities opened up in the 1990s, post-Soviet people often succumbed to the temptations of consumer capitalism and individualism, which strengthened authoritarian tendencies and the fragility of freedom. Reviewing the events 2022, the author notes that post-Soviet societies could not go the path of emancipation, remaining in the rut of imperialism and colonialism. The Russians betrayed the federation, and other nations could not realize their collective project, stuck between geopolitical projects. Summing up, we must support the fair statement about the need to learn the lessons of post-Soviet history. Countries risk repeating past mistakes without developing their own reflection, undermining their creative achievements. The author calls for deconstructing authoritarian regimes so new republics can cope with imperial-colonial structures. In this process, each person’s choice determines what the world will be like after the current caesura. And it is the completeness of taking into account past lessons that is decisive for building a stable future.

Overall, the work very clearly poses a fundamental question: Do we sufficiently understand ourselves and the structure and logic of the transformational processes that have occurred and are occurring? But no less important in this context are the questions – will we be able to apply an adequate tool for self-analysis in the conditions of memory wars (and direct wars)? As the author aptly puts it, the 1990s are over, but clarity is gone (p. 89). So, in the strange world of the 2020s, understanding the last thirty years requires increased attention. Dialogue and open discussion are needed, including, no matter how difficult it may be, in Ukraine, where, unfortunately, a ban on thinking is gradually taking place, which has never stopped in the East of Ukraine.