

Russia and Central Asia

By Peter Humeniuk

Russia is, by its nature, complex, and as a nation it is often misunderstood. The question of Russia post-Soviet Union is all the more critical at a time when the bipolar world of the Cold War era has given way to one with a single super-power. In these circumstances, post-dating the USSR, new states came into being. Russia took over the responsibilities of the Soviet Union and fulfilled them. In the 25 years since it was established, the Russian Federation has undergone an unparalleled and painful transformation, a process that is not yet complete.

Russia's size, history, culture, ethnic diversity, and not least its Orthodoxy, demand a carefully nuanced approach. A key concern is that many people at times lack the patience for a deeper understanding. It is argued that the ignorance and self-interest of Western advisers during the "wild 90s" have left their mark in Russia. To this day, for example, the term democracy has something of a negative connotation.

What is happening to Russia? What results will emerge from the ongoing evaluation of its recent past, which at times has been so tragic? What goals will the country set for itself and its future? Will the status quo, the internal division of powers, change? Will it be redefined, or completely overhauled?

Europe does not stop in Riga or Tallinn, nor indeed at the Ural Mountains. Vladivostok, for example, has a European and Christian character. Besides, Europe is not the centre of the world, and for Russia it is also not the only option. Moscow has its own interests and a common theme is that its leaders and people expect to be treated with greater respect by the West. At the moment the jury is out on the question as to whether a seemingly obvious and promising strategic partnership with the West will slide once more into a dangerous confrontation. The answer will also be partly determined by the behaviour of the West.

The approach to national and religious identity in the multi-ethnic nation of Russia is one of vital importance, both historically and at the present time. The so-called 'traditional religions' – Russian Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism – plus *de facto* the Catholic Church, Lutherans, Armenians etc, are recognised by the state and treated with respect. There are communities in which the line between destructive or radical sect-like groups is seen as difficult to draw, and here there may well be restrictions. From the mid- 90s onwards the formerly atheist Soviet Union was veritably flooded with a whole range of different sects and communities which, furnished with ample financial resources, were active within this vast domain but in the long term remained relatively unsuccessful. Some religious minorities are associated with such sects today. Perhaps even more urgently than in the Western nations, Russia must strive to integrate its "own" form of Islam, the radicalisation of which already has consequences for society. The dividing line between an exotic religious community and an active terrorist cell can be a very thin one.

The five Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan together cover an area of some 4,000,000 km² – approximately equal to the territory of the European Union – and have a total population of around 62 million, roughly equivalent to that of the United Kingdom. The region belongs to the core area of the historical Silk Road, bordering on Russia to the north, on China to the east and on Iran and Afghanistan to the south.

Apart from their geographical situation, these countries today share the common historical characteristic that until 1991 they were republics of the Soviet Union. Russian was the official language and the ideology was socialist. The economic, scientific and cultural life had Moscow as its dominant point of reference, with all the various advantages and disadvantages resulting from this. With the collapse of the Soviet empire, these countries had to rapidly rebuild new state structures, define their national identity and position

themselves, regionally and internationally. All the autonomous vassal states of the Soviet Union had ultimately been based on a central administration, partly in order to exclude secessionist tendencies by the nature of the system. The economic interrelationships were very close and hence their disentanglement was painful.

The ruling elite and party cadres had similar professional careers and experience behind them. With the collapse of the whole, the shared values and ways of thinking likewise became untenable. Following independence, it was difficult to find their bearings – Russia had its own problems to deal with; the EU was not an option. A great many Russians, Ukrainians, ethnic Germans and others felt compelled during this time to leave these countries with all their belongings. For the majority of them this was a traumatic experience.

In the end the Soviet cadres of the former socialist republics prevailed in each case. More or less strict authoritarian regimes were formed, essentially based on family clans. The search for a sense of identity is far from finished yet.

The economic basis for the countries of central Asia was, and still is in many cases, the rich natural resources (fossil fuels, especially in Turkmenistan) and raw materials (for example, high-value cotton in Uzbekistan). The revenues from this are unequally distributed. One important economic factor is the migrant workers from Central Asia who earn their living above all in Russia, in this way enabling their families to survive in their home countries. Public life in the two major Russian cities of Moscow and St Petersburg is today virtually dependent on these service workers. On the other hand these Muslim migrants represent a potential for ethnic and religious unrest and hence a potential danger for the ethnically diverse nation of Russia.

Kazakhstan plays a stabilising role within the region and has globally positioned itself through its customs union with Russia and Belarus.

For the thinly populated but gas-rich country of Turkmenistan (ranked 4th in the world) the oil / gas stream poker (for example the failed Nabucco project) plays a central role. Pipelines are planned to carry gas through the Caspian Sea and across the Caucasus into Turkey and from there into the European Union – as a supplementary alternative to the existing pipelines transporting gas to Russia and China. The most populous and ethnically unified country of Uzbekistan is relatively stable – albeit at the cost of harsh restrictions. Economically weak, Tajikistan was the scene of internal unrest and, together with Kyrgyzstan, is among the weaker and more unstable countries of the region. Both are mountainous countries and have frontiers that are difficult to patrol.

The countries of Central Asia belong to the Russian sphere of influence, politically, militarily and economically. For China too this region has strategic importance. Potential markets could be exploited here, along with much-needed natural resources and perhaps future land utilisation. For the United States, military bases are of interest, as a means of positioning itself with regard to Russia and China. This was however only a temporary option in Uzbekistan, in connection with the Afghanistan campaign.

One threat to these countries is the current developments in Afghanistan. Following the withdrawal of the Western powers from the Hindu Kush, there is a growing danger that radical Islamism may spread into the region. This is a frightening prospect for the authoritarian regimes, in which Islam is state-controlled, regarded as a component of national identity and present in rather moderate form in the public sphere. Additionally, with the withdrawal of the military forces from Afghanistan, one can expect a spread in the growth of drug production, with the obvious consequences. Also perceived as a threat are the series of “coloured revolutions” in Eastern Europe and “Arab springs” which in similar circumstances brought down authoritarian regimes, but left chaos in their wake. What people sought was

democracy and human rights, but the result was that Al Qaeda, Isis, the Taliban and so forth gained in strength, with a consequent mass exodus of Christians... Who is next?

These considerations do not necessarily justify the restrictions, but they do to some extent explain the reasons for them. For the Catholic and Orthodox Christians of this region, Kazakhstan – despite certain restrictions – is a place of peace and security. In the other countries Christians represent a very small minority, which must deal wisely both with the respective regimes and with the wider Muslim society. Other religious communities that are not traditionally rooted in society are – like all other organisations not controlled by the state – essentially viewed as a potential threat and in many cases treated restrictively.

Note

This analysis forms part of Aid to the Church in Need's *Religious Freedom in the World Report – 2014*. To view the report in full please visit: www.religion-freedom-report.org