

# It's Time to De-Sovietize Our Perspective on Central Asia

The use of “former Soviet” to refer to Central Asia can be blinding, distracting from the realizing that the region isn't static.

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On October 29, Maxim Eristavi, a Ukrainian journalist, posted [a tweet](#) criticizing the use of the phrase “former Soviet republic” when referring to sovereign states which were historically parts of the Soviet Union. He argued that the term is no longer relevant as the collapse of the Soviet Union took place nearly three decades ago. “Our today's identity is not defined by our colonial past,” Eristavi tweeted.

To some extent, this particular example illuminates a problem with the way we observe the post-Soviet realm. For some journalists or authors, it remains hard to disentangle the looming history of the Soviet Union from the now-sovereign republics, even 27 years after its collapse in 1991.

This condition is even more apparent when discussing Central Asia. The region, comprising the states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, has its own features which make it different from other post-Soviet regions. First, Central Asia consists of states with predominantly Muslim and Turkic (except Tajikistan) identities, as opposed to the Christian and European identities held by other post-Soviet regions, like the Baltic states.

Second, Central Asian states have showed a relatively diverging trajectory compared to other post-Soviet regions. While other post-Soviet states have slowly embraced democracy and liberalism, all five Central Asian states remain essentially authoritarian. Freedom House's [Nations in Transit 2018](#) report labeled all five Central Asian states as “consolidated authoritarian regimes,” indicating low performance in regards to democratic progress.

Third, the region is [geographically landlocked](#) and seems to be overshadowed by other regional powers such as Russia, India, and China. It is easy to dismiss the region as merely a “crossroads” or “bridge” between the East and the West. Shedding the “former Soviet” narrative has thus been difficult for Central Asia.

Despite such characteristics, the repeated use of “former Soviet” is both blinding and misleading as it diverts us from realizing that Central Asia is not a static region. Albeit slowly, the region has changed, particularly with regard to nation-building. Since the end of the Soviet Union, Central Asian states have dealt with the matter of crafting national identities to distinguish themselves from one another. The measures taken by each state have been different, yet they demonstrate effort on the part of Central Asian states to move away from the “former Soviet republic” imagery.

Kazakhstan, as the largest country in Central Asia, asserts its identity as a “Eurasian state,” initially proposed by President Nursultan Nazarbayev in 1994. This consideration is based upon Kazakhstan’s geographical position between Asia and Europe and [“contending claims and counter-claims on the country’s real identity and belongingness.”](#) In 2014, during his speech at the Lomonosov Moscow State University, Nazarbayev also stated that his nation has [progressed very far from “Soviet archaism”](#) dismissing the possibility of a reversion toward Soviet identity. Despite poorly performing in the democratic sector, Kazakhstan has embraced free trade and has now been classified as a [market economy](#).

Kyrgyzstan has taken a different route. Widely regarded as the [“island of democracy in Central Asia,”](#) the state was [the first in Central Asia to hold democratic parliamentary elections](#) following the ousting of former President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April 2010. Despite some [fluctuations](#) in the quality of its democracy, which led to it being classified as an authoritarian regime in the 2018 Nations in Transit report, Kyrgyzstan has nevertheless diverged considerably from the old, centralistic Soviet system toward a new regime which commits itself to more openness, especially when compared to its neighbors.

Apart from political and economic measures, countries like Tajikistan and Turkmenistan use cultural aspects to detach themselves from the “former Soviet” narrative. Tajikistan, the only country in Central Asia with a predominantly Persian-speaking populace, took a different course in withdrawing from lingering Soviet association. In 2016, for example, the state implemented a law [banning surnames with Russian endings](#) such as “-ov” and “-ova,” making way for Tajik surnames with endings like “-zod,” “-zoda,” “pur,” or “far” to resurface.

On the other hand, Turkmenistan has utilized a process of nation-building through a personality cult whose foundations were laid by the first president, Saparmurat Niyazov. During his presidency, Niyazov pursued an extravagant way of rebuilding the Turkmen identity such as calling himself “the father of Turkmens,” building golden statues of himself, as well as writing a book called *Ruhnama* (“book of the soul”) which was intended as spiritual guidance for his people. Even though Niyazov passed away in 2006, the personality cult model remains a feature in Turkmenistan as the current president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov has replaced Niyazov’s cult with his own.

In Uzbekistan, the most populated country in Central Asia, [political stability and interethnic peace](#) are two leading concerns since independence. Following those goals, Islam Karimov, who ruled Uzbekistan from 1991 until his death in 2016, adopted a hard stance toward political opposition and religious groups. When Shavkat Mirziyoyev took power following Karimov’s death, however, efforts to liberalize the state’s economy and outward-facing attitude have been apparent even though Uzbekistan [remains an authoritarian regime](#).

With such changing and differing dynamics among the states of Central Asia, painting them with a big “former Soviet republic” brush simply distracts attention

from the details of change in the region over the last three decades. Rather than viewing Central Asia as a geopolitical backwater which rose to global politics merely through inheritance of the Soviet legacy, we should start acknowledging this region as a collection of emerging states with their own distinct national identities.

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