

After the Post-Soviet Period: A Geographical Analysis of Social Processes within the Shifting Eastern European Buffer Zone

Long report 31.01.2023

Introduction

Our geographical focus of our research was the European post-Soviet realm, although several of our findings have been extended to other post-Soviet regions as well, given the fact that the entire post-Soviet realm existed within the confines of a single state in the ‘short 20th century’, the Soviet Union. It should be noted at the outset that our research findings must be interpreted in the context of the region’s devaluation as a result of the demise of the bipolar world order and the subsequent political, economic and social transformation of Hungary, which also belonged to the Soviet sphere of interest throughout the preceding decades. There was neither political nor social demand for up-to-date knowledge on the spatiality of recent social, economic and political processes, and therefore, the state-socialist epistemologies that had pervaded domestic discourses over the previous decades were preserved. As a result, the academic community has tended to turn away from scholarly research of this area, which, apart from a few exceptions, has left a blank spot in the geographical literature of the decade after the fall of state socialism.

The participants of the research

The majority of research participants are members of the Research Group on the Geography of Ethnicity and Religion, founded at the Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences of ELTE Eötvös Loránd University in 2015, with degrees in geography and history: Zsolt Bottlik (ELTE), associate professor, principal investigator; Margit Kőszegi (ELTE), assistant professor; Dávid Karácsonyi (Geographical Institute, Research Centre for Astronomy and Earth Sciences), senior researcher; Márton Pete (ELTE), a young researcher who had just defended his PhD at the beginning of the project; and Tamás Illés (ELTE), a PhD student. Owing to the transdisciplinary nature of the research topic, one of the colleagues who joined the research group from outside the university is a historian and geographer (Gábor Demeter [Institute of History, Research Centre for the Humanities], research fellow, senior researcher), whereas the other one is a historian and political scientist (András Rácz [Pázmány Péter Catholic University], senior researcher).

Right before the project started, young researcher Márton Pete (who was originally planned to join the research as a research associate) left for another job. His position was taken by Margit Kőszegi, who was originally nominated as a member of the research team. In connection with this change, assistant professor Márton Berki (ELTE) also joined the project at its start. Finally, PhD student Géza Barta (ELTE) joined the research group at the mid-term of the project.

The progress of the research

The first year of the project was dedicated to the collection and systematic review of the research topic’s relevant literature, the development of our theoretical framework, the establishment of a **GIS database** on economic processes, as well as the subsequent continuous extension of this database. In accordance with one of our key objectives highlighted in our project application, the first step was the creation of a *GIS database* covering the rayon(district)-level territorial units of three countries of our study area; Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. This was subsequently extended to the ex-Soviet realm’s Caucasian and Central Asian regions, too. The analyses carried out with this extended database, as well as the geographical specificities and processes visualised with their help

(in the form of almost 200 maps), were all incorporated into the studies and book chapters prepared by our research team.

In order to expand our international network and to disseminate our research results more widely, our research team organised several **international workshops and conferences** (*‘International Workshop on Regional Geography’*, *‘10 Years of Ukrainian Studies at the Geographical Institute’*, and the *‘Cities After Transition – 9th International Urban Geographies of Post-Communist States Conference’*), where we delivered several presentations on the current state of our research. In addition to these, members of our research team have continuously presented our results at **domestic and international conferences** as well.

Additionally, our **field visits** were also important elements in the internationalisation process and the transdisciplinary embedding of our research. These have predominantly supported our empirical results and our research team’s external relations and scholarly network. The information gained on the ground greatly contributed to our understanding of local historical and geographical specificities.

2018 – In *Moldova*, in addition to our field observations, we were guests of the Moldova State University in Chişinău and the Tiraspol State University, in order to expand our collaborative research opportunities.

2019 – In *Ukraine*, we visited the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv.

2019 – As part of our further visits to *Ukraine*, we were guests of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. Here we presented our research results to the Geography students of the university, in the form of lectures and seminars.

In addition to going to field visits, organising conferences and workshops, delivering presentations and the continuous processing of relevant literature, we have of course also **published** our findings. Already from the very beginning of the research process, it was important to document our results. One of its pillars is the website of the ELTE Research Group on the Geography of Ethnicity and Religion, which also helped to make the results of the project widely accessible to the public. Furthermore, in line with the basic requirements of the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (NKFIH), we published our research results in academic formats (books and journal articles) as well. This was intensified from the second year of the project.

We have also utilised our results in education from the very beginning. Members of the research team who are also involved in **teaching activity** at ELTE Eötvös Loránd University have incorporated the knowledge gained from the research into numerous lectures and seminars. In the final phase of the project, the rapidly changing international situation and the parallelly growing public interest led to an increase in the **popular dissemination** of our results, aimed at reaching a broader public.

Problems and obstacles encountered during the research

The research process was negatively impacted by two major international events, which forced us to take the opportunity to extend the duration of the project (which was originally scheduled to end on the 30th of September 2020). One of these was the **COVID-19 global pandemic**, as a consequence of which three already planned and prepared field visits to Ukraine could not be carried out in the spring of 2020 and 2021. Additionally, two of our accepted and also already scheduled international conference presentations at the AAG (American Association of Geographers) annual conference in Denver, USA were cancelled, too. Unfortunately, this was also the case for several of our Hungarian conference presentations. Although we had hoped that the above-mentioned field visits could be finally realised in the spring of 2022, this did not happen either, due to the unfortunate events of **Russia’s war in Ukraine**. Instead, we carried out field visits that helped our research in another way. The destinations of these were also in the European post-Soviet realm, in its Baltic region: in *Lithuania* the Vilnius University, Faculty of Natural Sciences, Department of Geography and Land

Management, whereas in *Estonia* the University of Tartu. During these field visits, we exchanged ideas with colleagues from Baltic countries on the possible future directions of our research amidst the current political situation.

Actual results of the research

Our results can be grouped around three major points. First, we would like to recapitulate our scientific results, and second, we would also like to reflect on how these are utilised in the teaching activity of the members of our research team. Finally, we need to summarise the participants' efforts in the field of popular science as well.

Concerning our **scientific results**, the first to be mentioned are the political geographical ones. By mapping the development and specificities of state structures, as well as the cultural and linguistic foundations of identity constructions in the region, we have highlighted the different features of the region's societies and the multi-scalar intertwining of external processes, regional identities and local identities. Our research has also provided important background information on how the geopolitical situation of the region has evolved in the recent past, as well as on the direction(s) it has taken and on the processes that may shape it in the future. We have been able to grasp how different discourses – whether pro-Western, pro-Russian, or nationalist ones – overlap and influence the way our image of the region and the attitudes of policy-makers and the public opinion are shaped. To some extent, it has also been possible to provide a more nuanced picture of the new economic trends that are influencing internal relations. At the same time, our summary of the economic situation has shed light on the characteristics of regional differences in various geographical (urban-rural, central-peripheral, etc.) dimensions as well.

Unfortunately, Russia's war on Ukraine launched on the 24th of February 2022 confirmed our earlier assumption that revealing the geopolitical situation of the region, monitoring the events and outlining possible future strategies no longer carry important information only for the scientific community, but also for society as a whole. The escalation of the conflict is of utmost importance for the future of the Hungarian communities living in the area, as well as for Hungary and for Europe, and therefore the need for further scientific research and its usefulness are indisputable. The published results not only alleviated the information gap mentioned already in our project application, but also strengthened the international embeddedness of Hungarian regional geography and may help decision-makers to understand the complex socio-spatial processes of the region.

The results are, of course, also utilised in higher education. Members of the research team who are also involved in **teaching activity** at ELTE Eötvös Loránd University incorporate the research result into university lectures and seminars. Over the years, we are constantly expanding and improving the topics that are covered in these courses. Our scientific results now appear in the courses of multiple faculties of ELTE (Faculty of Science, Faculty of Humanities, Faculty of Social Sciences). For the fifth year in a row, starting from the 2018–2019 academic year, students have the opportunity to learn about our research results within the confines of the seminar entitled '*Nacionalizmusok a posztszovjet térségben*' (nacionall8gm) ('*Nationalisms in the post-Soviet realm*') that is entirely based on the findings of the project. The special colloquium entitled '*A posztszovjet térség etnikai kisebbségei*' ('*Ethnic minorities in the post-Soviet realm*'), which was announced as a new subject two years ago, can be taken up by students of other faculties as well (posztetnl20gx; NTb128/F9). Utilising our research results, we have also improved the material of two main colloquia ('*Etnikumok és vallások földrajza*' ['*Geographies of ethnicity and religion*'], '*Európa társadalomföldrajza*' ['*Social geography of Europe*']). As part of the project, theses have been / are being written, too: two on the BSc level ('*Kazahsztán etnikai földrajzi elemzése*' ['*Ethnic geography of Kazakhstan*'], '*A Balti országok regionális földrajzi sajátosságai*' ['*Regional geography of the Baltic States*']), one on the MSc level ('*A posztszovjet város elhelyezése a kortárs városföldrajzi diskurzusból Lemberg példáján*' ['*Positioning the post-Soviet city in contemporary*']

urban geography discourses on the example of Lviv’) and, from this academic year, one on the PhD level (‘Társadalmi egyenlőtlenségek és választói válaszok az EU perifériáin’ [‘Social inequalities and voters’ responses on the peripheries of the EU’]). In addition to these, two PhD courses continue to run in the ELTE Doctoral School of Earth Sciences as well, this year for the fifth time (‘Posztszovjet nacionalizmusok társadalomföldrajzi vizsgálata’ [‘Human geographical analysis of post-Soviet nationalisms’], ‘A posztszovjet térség geopolitikai és etnikai földrajzi vizsgálata’ [‘Geopolitical and ethnic geographical analysis of the post-Soviet realm’]).

Given the media consumption habits of today’s society and the credibility of the information circulating on the Internet, we believe it is important to disseminate our research findings to a wider audience as well. In order to popularise scientific knowledge, we created our *research project’s information page* on the website of the ELTE Research Group on the Geography of Ethnicity and Religion, where all results of the research have been made available to the public. Our research topics and the results we have achieved throughout the previous years have become particularly timely after the 24th of February 2022, in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This heightened public interest has made it particularly important to widely promote our geographical research of the post-Soviet realm. We will continue to do so after the closing of the project as well, through a *podcast* series launched jointly with GeoGulliver, via an increased number of lectures and talks, as well as by regularly publishing in ‘aFöldgömb’, a popular science magazine with tens of thousands of subscribers. In the latter magazine, we have also launched a new column that is focusing on the geographical aspects of Russia’s war on Ukraine, using maps based on our GIS database. In addition to these, our scientific results have appeared in several other forms of media as well (in Kossuth Radio and Trend FM radio stations, on several YouTube-channels, as well as in various online magazines [e.g. Válasz online]).

Appendix:

Workshop presentations

1. Dávid Karácsonyi: Belarusian economy: a model, a miracle or just survival?
2. Zsolt Bottlik, Gábor Demeter: Language and nationality (self-identification) as political protest behavior in European post-Soviet region
3. Márton Berki: ‘...the opium of the people’? Religiosity in socialist new towns
4. Dávid Karácsonyi: Ukraine: Europe’s big cake? Some short notes

Conference presentations

1. Bottlik Zsolt: Politik und Sprache –Sprachnutzung als politische Attitüde in den postsowjetischen Ländern (15. *Neue Kulturgeographie, Freiburg*);
2. Illés Tamás: Post-Soviet transitions amidst globalization of culture: hybrid identities (15. *Neue Kulturgeographie, Freiburg Freiburg*),
3. Illés Tamás: Nationalisms without nation-statehood: shifting identities in the Republic of Moldova (3. *Annual Conference on Russian and East-European Studies, Tartu*);
4. Bottlik Zsolt: A nyelvhasználat kultúrföldrajzi háttere az európai posztszovjet térségben (2. *Dimenziók – Kultúrák és Etnikumok találkozása, Budapest*);
5. Kőszegi Margit: Etnikumok érdekszférák találkozásában: orosz expanzió a Fekete-tengernél (2. *Dimenziók – Kultúrák és Etnikumok találkozása, Budapest*);
6. Illés Tamás: Kulturális átmenetek egy geopolitikai ütközőzónában – a moldáv identitás rétegei (2. *Dimenziók – Kultúrák és Etnikumok találkozása, Budapest*)

7. Demeter Gábor, Bagdi Róbert: Analyzing and visualizing spatial patterns, social composition and wealth based on census data (1870) in Northeastern Hungary (*17. International Conference of Historical Geographers, Varsó*)
8. Demeter Gábor: Social differentiation and spatial patterns in a multiethnic city in the 19th century (*GIS and the City – Darmstadt*)
9. Bottlik Zsolt – Kőszegi Margit: Etnische Kartographie in Ungarn und Rumänien nach dem Trianonvertrag – Wurzel der ethnischen Kartographie Ungarns nach der postsowjetischen Zeit (*16. Neue Kulturgeographie, Eichstätt*);
10. Berki Márton – Kőszegi Margit – Barta Géza – Bottlik Zsolt – Illés Tamás: Spaces and times of liminality: Russian and Soviet expansion endeavors in the European post-Soviet realm (Association of the American Geographers, Annual Meeting, Washington)
11. Illés Tamás: Contesting geopolitical discourses over an essentialized Moldovan identity (EUGEO 2019, Galway)
12. Bottlik Zsolt – Kőszegi Margit – Illés Tamás: Anwesenheit der Macht im Stadtbild – Fallbeispiel Chisinau (Moldawien) (Zurück zur Geopolitik? Leitbilder, Risikoszenarien, Diskurse und Emotionen in der Politischen Geographie; Münster)
13. Barta Géza – Illés Tamás – Bottlik Zsolt: Mit mutatnak az etnikai/nyelvi statisztikák (1897–2010) Orosz és szovjet adatok és ami mögötte van (DIVERZITÁS ÉS HOMOGENITÁS A TÖRTÉNELEMBEN, A TÁRSADALOMBAN ÉS A KÖRNYEZETBEN, Budapest)
14. Kőszegi Margit – Linc Annamária Az azeritől az azerbajdzsániig: homogén nemzeti identitás alakítása egy posztszovjet államban (DIVERZITÁS ÉS HOMOGENITÁS A TÖRTÉNELEMBEN, A TÁRSADALOMBAN ÉS A KÖRNYEZETBEN, Budapest)
15. Barta Géza: A karéliai tér etnikus identitást befolyásoló reprezentációi (DIVERZITÁS ÉS HOMOGENITÁS A TÖRTÉNELEMBEN, A TÁRSADALOMBAN ÉS A KÖRNYEZETBEN, Budapest)
16. Baroch Csaba – Berki Márton: Lwów/Lemberg/Lvov/Lviv szimbolikus tere – Diverzitás vagy homogenitás? (DIVERZITÁS ÉS HOMOGENITÁS A TÖRTÉNELEMBEN, A TÁRSADALOMBAN ÉS A KÖRNYEZETBEN, Budapest)
17. Berki Márton – Baroch Csaba – Bottlik Zsolt: „Städtische Raum, als „Palimpsest“ – Am Beispiel Lviv (West Ukraine)” Neue Kulturgeographie konferencia Bonn, Rheinische Friedrich Wilhelms Egyetem
18. Kőszegi Margit: The Balkan is our East The imagined „subaltern empire” in the 19th century Hungarian Geography (Institut für Länderkunde Leipzig)
19. A Lukesenka-korszak vége? – Politikai válság Belaruszban – kerekasztal beszélgetés egyik meghívott vendége Karácsonyi Dávid 2020. augusztus 27. Nemzeti Közszolgálati Egyetem, Budapest. (<https://www.facebook.com/events/582541555775782/>)
20. Karácsonyi Dávidot a konferencia tudományos szervező bizottságba kérték föl International Scientific and Practical Conference “Region-2020: Optimal development strategy”. 2020. október 8. Harkivi Karazin Nemzeti Egyetem, Harkiv, Ukrajna (http://soc-econom-region.univer.kharkov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Region-2019_eng-1.pdf)

Educational writings/ media appearances:

14.07.2019; About the presentation of our research group's book and the Dimension conference on Kossuth radio in the programme „Nagyítás”: https://www.mediaklikk.hu/radio-lejatszo-kossuth/?date=2019-07-14_15-06-01&enddate=2019-07-14_15-30-00&ch=mr1

HírTV, Globál, 08.29.2020.

<https://hirtv.hu/global/global-nincs-szo-szines-forradalomrol-feheroroszorszagban-2507337>

Zsolt Bottlik's lecture at the Márton Áron Szakkolégium "MÁSZ Szakest" lecture series (11.11.2020) Power, identity and social conflicts: ethnic geographical studies in Belarus
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRRTgHjQ3YY>

Podcastek:

- 1) A kelet-európai tér geográfus szemmel - podcast kerekasztal beszélgetés
[Geogulliver - Geography around the World](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hw-B_h58Rkw&t=3385s) és az ELTE TTK Földrajz- és Földtudományi Intézetében működő Etnikai és Vallásföldrajzi Műhely podcastje
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hw-B_h58Rkw&t=3385s
- 2) Miért érdekes az Antarktisz, Szibéria vagy épp az ausztrál Outback a geográfus számára?
[Geogulliver - Geography around the World](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Xp5n8J9tvw&t=1s) és az ELTE TTK Földrajz- és Földtudományi Intézetében működő Etnikai és Vallásföldrajzi Műhely podcastje
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Xp5n8J9tvw&t=1s>
- 3) Az örmény-azeri konfliktus újabb fejezete...
[Geogulliver - Geography around the World](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CuROmSaXLbA) és az ELTE TTK Földrajz- és Földtudományi Intézetében működő Etnikai és Vallásföldrajzi Műhely podcastje
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CuROmSaXLbA>
- 4) Ukrajnai orosz invázió - podcast beszélgetés 2022.03.11
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnSzB6KIUKU>
- 5) Orosz-ukrán háború - Geográfus és történész szemmel - Beszélgetés Rác Andrással 2022.05.01
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-t7GrDqCn0o&t=1101s>
- 6) Dezinformáció, buborékok, dogmák és érdekek az orosz-ukrán konfliktus mögött 2022.05.05
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y34WdSV-sys&t=4s>
- 7) Leválás az orosz gáزرól? - Deák András és Szabó István energiapiaci szakértőkkel beszélgettünk 2022.05.07
- 8) Ukrajnai helyzet – a Geogulliver podcastban 2022.05.12
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQ1FFgxGIxk&t=90s>
- 9) Orosz-ukrán háború - Fedinec Csilla kisebbségkutatóval beszélgettünk 2022.05.22
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qccwct7C4eI>
- 10) Mitrovits Miklóssal az orosz-ukrán háborúról - Geogulliver podcast 2022.06.05
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fc3IF8D0Dt0>

VÁLASZ Online podcast

- 1) Milyen tél jön és hogyan hat majd a háborúra? Éghajlatkutató és geográfus válaszol
<https://www.valaszonline.hu/2022/11/24/szabo-peter-meteorologia-bottlik-zsolt-foldrajz-orosz-ukran-podcast/>

Trend FM

- 01.08.2019; Monitor Délután; Beszélgetése a Kalmükökről (Illés Tamás)
<https://trendfm.hu/musor?musor=7782>
- 03.09.2020.; Monitor Délután; Beszélgetés Belaruszról (Karácsonyi Dávid)
<https://trendfm.hu/musor?musor=7782&adas=35389>
- 19.05.2022. Monitor Délután; Beszélgetés a belarusz nyelv sajátosságairól (Bottlik Zsolt)
<https://trendfm.hu/musor?musor=7782&adas=44728>
- 08.09.2022. Monitor Délután; Beszélgetés az újperzsa nyelv elterjedéséről (Bottlik Zsolt)
<https://trendfm.hu/musor?musor=7782&adas=46240>