



## The environmental scenario in the post-Soviet region: reflections on challenges to justice and sustainability

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**Abstract:** The challenges that climate change is bringing to us today raise concerns about the well-being of present and future generations. It is important to understand that perspectives on this topic vary greatly depending on the context, historical background, and narrative disseminated.

The post-Soviet region, encompassing the countries that emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, has a complex history with [environmental issues](#), shaped by decades of Soviet [industrial policies](#) and subsequent transitions to [market economies](#). Understanding this background is essential to grasp the current environmental perspectives of the populations in these countries.

The ongoing challenges of climate change raise concerns about the well-being of present and future generations. It is irrefutable that there must be a global commitment so that together we can support a fair climate transition to a sustainable world with accessible resources and quality of life. However, it is important to understand that perspectives on this topic vary greatly depending on the context, the historical background, and the narrative disseminated.

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## **Soviet industrialisation and environmental degradation**

'The smoke of chimneys is the breath of Soviet Russia', this was one of the slogans [reproduced](#) at the time of the Soviet Union, which clearly demonstrate the approach of the time towards available natural resources and how these should be used in favour of growth and prosperity without an intrinsic concern for the consequences of its use. The Soviet Union gave large-scale agricultural projects, heavy industry, and rapid urbanization [top priority](#). Significant environmental degradation resulted from this, an [intense industrialization](#). It was typical to use natural resources extensively without considering the effects on the environment. Rivers were redirected, forests were cleared, and land was abused for mining and cultivation. Industrial hubs like [Magnitogorsk and Norilsk](#) rose to the top of the global pollution list. Due to outdated technology and a lack of environmental controls, contamination of the air, water and soil was [widespread](#).

## **Environmental disasters**

There were several impactful environmental disasters with serious consequences. For example, [Chernobyl Disaster](#) (1986), the deadly nuclear disaster that occurred at the Ukrainian Chernobyl power station, brought attention to the risks associated with disregarding environmental protection. The effects on the ecosystem and the long-term health of the people concerned are still evident today. Also, the [Aral Sea crisis](#) which dramatically shrunk as a result of rivers being redirected for agriculture, resulted in an ecological collapse, health issues, and economic losses in the [neighboring areas](#). A destructive legacy.

## **Post-Soviet transition**

After the fall of the Soviet Union, many countries belonging to the bloc faced an economic collapse. The upheaval in the economy after the fall of the Soviet Union resulted in a decrease in industrial output and, ironically, a [brief improvement](#) in certain environmental indices as a result of lower pollution.

It was difficult for recently independent states to enact sensible environmental laws. Progress was hampered by inadequate government, corruption, and a lack of financing, resulting in a [failure](#) of regulatory frameworks.

## **Current environmental perspectives**

Focusing on community involvement, there has been a surge in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Friends of the Earth Europe ([FoEE](#)), Ukraine Nature Conservation Society ([Ukrpryroda](#)), and grassroots movements such as [Narodniy Rukh](#) (People's Movement) of Ukraine, [Kmara](#) (Enough) in Georgia, advocating for environmental causes. Increased awareness is partly attributed to access to information and international collaboration, essential for growing understanding and

advocacy. Younger generations, those residing in affected areas exhibit greater concern for environmental issues and actively [advocate](#) for sustainable practices.

[Regulatory actions](#) come from the government response, and several states such as [Lithuania and Estonia](#) have taken steps to establish laws and oversight agencies.

However, the enforcement of these regulations varies. Many countries that were part of the Soviet Union have prioritised growth over environmental conservation. Industries such as oil, gas and mining play a role in their economies leading to conflicts, between interests and environmental concerns. Furthermore, countries like Armenia have been faced with several armed conflicts, which diverts attention from the political agenda and the population to [other issues](#).

Some post-Soviet republics [such as](#) Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Azerbaijan, have adopted more progressive environmental policies as a result of their integration into international environmental frameworks, including the [Paris Agreement](#). This is one of the effects of international influence that manifests itself in territories through their commitments in line with other states. While foreign partnerships and investments have the potential to introduce cutting-edge, eco-friendly technologies and practices, they also run the risk of escalating reliance on resource exploitation, one of the effects we need [to avoid](#).

In the current situation, international human rights standards also deserve specific attention in the elaboration of effective environmental policies in post-Soviet countries. For instance, relevant work has been done by the UN the Special Rapporteur on the issue of [human rights obligations](#) relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment as well as by the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of [climate change](#).

Integrating human rights principles guarantees that environmental laws safeguard the rights of people and communities, particularly those most at risk from the effects of environmental deterioration, in addition to addressing ecological issues.

Through a number of alliances and agreements, like the [Eastern Partnership program](#), the European Union has been very effective in promoting the adoption of environmental policies based on human rights. This program seeks to strengthen governance, advance democratic reforms, and bring human rights and environmental laws into compliance with EU norms.

Although there have been some encouraging changes as a result of these international efforts, there are still worries regarding the discrepancy between policy commitments and actual execution. The application of environmental and human rights norms can occasionally be complicated by strong industrial interests, corruption, and geopolitical issues.

## **Looking ahead**

The environmental perspectives in the post-Soviet region are shaped by a historical context of intense industrialization and neglect, punctuated by significant disasters like

Chernobyl. While there has been progress in awareness and some policy initiatives, many challenges remain. The balance between economic development and environmental sustainability is a delicate one, influenced by both internal dynamics and external pressures. The future of environmental protection in the region will depend on the continued engagement of civil society, the effectiveness of governmental regulations, and the ability to integrate sustainable practices into economic strategies. Environmental organizations and activism in the post-Soviet region have made significant progress since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but they continue to face substantial challenges. The historical legacy of environmental degradation, combined with political and economic difficulties, poses ongoing obstacles. However, increasing public awareness, the rise of grassroots movements, and international support offer hope for more effective environmental protection and sustainable development in the [future](#).