

Identifying the new Eurasian orientation in modern Russian geopolitical thought

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the interpretation of Eurasianism as a geopolitical concept, as well as on its competition with other traditional theories of international relations that influence contemporary geopolitical thought. Today, we can analyse the concept of Neo-Eurasianism which is seen in the development of the contemporary Russian geopolitical thought. Such circumstances have occurred after 2000, with the beginning of Vladimir Putin's rule started, who, again, tries to position Russia as the dominant geopolitical factor between Europe and Asia. This paper will analyse several statements made by Putin, classified by Alexander Dugin as part of a new trend or a new geopolitical direction. The wide range of political and military activities undertaken by Russia in recent years supports our conclusion that some of them are an integral part of the concept of neo-Eurasianism. This paper will also offer insights into the significance of neo-Eurasianism for contemporary Russia's foreign policy.

Keywords: Eurasianism, Eurasia, Russia, Putin, security, geopolitics

1. Introduction

The Eurasian concept originates from the Russian geopolitical school. The fundamental principles of this geopolitical trend are incorporated in the continental idea, which was developed by the followers of Eurasian thought from the Russian geopolitical school. Namely, Eurasians were the first to use the term geopolitics and the basic geopolitical categories in Russia. They offered their own geopolitical model of the world and established the national geopolitical tasks and priorities. The Eurasian doctrine, in its essence, appears as a geopolitical doctrine because it is based on the geopolitical principle "geography as a destiny".

The Eurasians' merits can be seen in the fact that they are responsible for creating the geopolitical project for the future Russia in the frames of the future

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continent – Eurasia. In the Eurasians' concept, Russia appears as a separate ethno-geographical and cultural entity, which takes up the central position (heartland) between the West and the East, Europe and Asia. The Eurasian movement started developing in the early 1920s, within the Russian emigration. The beginnings of Eurasianism were first registered in Sofia, and then the movement became associated with Prague and later on with Berlin. The founders of the Eurasian movement were the philologist Trubetzkoy, the historian Vernadsky, the geographer and economist Savicky, the Orthodox pastor Florovsky, the philosopher Karsavin and the artist Suvchinsky.

In the course of history, in the period between 1926 until 1929, the centre of the movement was relocated to Paris. The centre in Paris was run by the philosopher Karsavin, who insisted on some ideological-political rapprochement and cooperation with the Soviet authorities. Certain theories indicate that the movement was sabotaged by members of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) (Shlapentokh, 2007, p.67). Trubetzkoy and Savicky called this action a "suicide of the movement itself". In 1930, the Eurasian movement ceased to exist. It was once more revived at the beginning of 1960 by Lev Nikolayevich Gumilyov (Zheltoy and Zheltoy, 2012, p. 284).

Gumilyov's works paint a new picture of the Eurasian East, which is not done by picturing some kind of barbaric states on the periphery of civilisation, but an independent and dynamic centre of ethnogenesis, culture, political history, state and technical development. According to him, ethnic Russians are not part of the path of development of the Slavs, but rather a separate ethnos, which was created by blending the Turkish - Tatar and the Slavic peoples. Thus, the Russian control over those Eurasian countries inhabited by the Turkish-Tatar ethnos is justified. The entire Russian civilisation is created by the joint Turkish-Tatar and Slav ethnogenesis effectuated, in a geographical sense, as a historical alliance between "the woods" and "the steppe" (Dugin, 2004, p.135).

From Gumilyov's thoughts on Eurasianism, several geopolitical conclusions can be drawn. He states that Eurasia is a fertile and exceptionally rich soil for ethnogenesis and cultural-genesis. This actually means that we need to wean off viewing the world history through an unipolar optic, that is to say "The West and all the rest", which is a characteristic of the Atlantic historiography. Furthermore, Gumilyov noted that the geopolitical synthesis of "the woods" and "the steppe" which lies at the basis of the great Russian statehood presents a key reality of the cultural-strategic control over Asia and Eastern Europe. In addition, that control would contribute to maintaining the balance between the East and the West. Also, Gumilyov states that the Western civilisation is in the final stage of its own ethnogenesis, since it represents a conglomerate of "fictional" ethnicities. It is important to mention his standpoint that, in the near future, there will be rapid changes on the political and the cultural map of the Planet, after which the domination of the "relict" ethnicities would last long.

One possible explanation regarding the Eurasia phenomenon which could be found in scientific studies is offered by Stephan Wiedeker. Namely, Wiedeker underlines that Eurasianism can be understood as a reaction to the Pan-Turkish ideas, which were discussed in Russia, Western Europe and the Ottoman Empire in the first quarter of the 20th century. The spreading of the Pan-Turkish idea among the Muslims in Russia, in the second half of the 20th century, had provoked a situation in which this idea was perceived as a threat to Russia's territorial integrity on the political stage as well as in public debates. We can define Eurasianism as an intentionally constituted integration ideology, whose main goal is to protect Russia as a multi-national Empire. Ideologically speaking, Eurasianism had to undermine the Pan-Turkish movement, which was a security threat for Russia because this movement strived towards the liberation of the Russian Turks from the Russian domination through securing autonomy and equal rights in Russia or their integration with the Ottoman Empire. Even though the Pan-Turkish movement did not have a huge support in the last years of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th century, it was still perceived as a threat against the territorial integrity of the Russian Empire (Wiedeker, 2007, pp. 39-71).

2. Development of the concept of Neo-Eurasianism

We should underline the fact that Gumilyov did not formulate his geopolitical considerations based on his own world map. That was done by his followers in a period characterised by the weakening of the Marxist ideology and the censorship it imposed. This modern concept was called Neo-Eurasianism. There are several types of Neo-Eurasianism:

1. The first type is a multi-dimensional ideology, created by some of the Russian political opposition circles that opposed the liberal reforms in the period from 1990 until 1994. Neo-Eurasianism is based on the ideas of Savicky, Vernadsky, the duke Trubetzkoy and the ideologist of the Russian national-Bolshevism, Nicolay Ustryalov. The analysis of the historical Eurasians is accepted as applicable in the frames of the contemporary situations. The thesis of the national ideocracy with imperial-continental proportions, at the same time retorts the Western liberalism, as well as the narrow ethnic nationalism. Russia is perceived as a foundation of the geopolitical "big space", while its ethnic mission is constituting an Empire. The Soviet period of the Russian history is regarded as the modern form of the traditional Russian national aspiration towards world expansion and as Alexander Dugin says: "Eurasian anti-Atlantistic universalism" (Dugin, 2004, p.139) Within the scope of Neo-Eurasianism, the European continental projects through which the horizons of the Eurasian studies are opened also towards Europe are intensely and thoroughly studied as a potential continental force.

2. The second characteristic of Neo-Eurasianism is identifying Islamic states, especially continental Iran, as the most important strategic ally. The idea for a continental Russian-Islamic alliance sets the basis of the anti-Atlantic strategy of the Southwest coast of the Eurasian continent. The clash of civilisations theory, promoted by Samuel Huntington, recognises this Neo-Eurasianism characteristic through pointing out the biggest threat of the Western civilisation, which could derive from a potential Orthodox-Islamic alliance.
3. The other types of Neo-Eurasianism are actually an entire complex of the previously presented ideas combined with a variable political reality, often being only a question of pragmatic economic Eurasianism founded on the revival of the economic cooperation among the post-Soviet areas.

2.1. Analysis of the concept of (Neo-)Eurasianism

In the years of the Soviet Union, Russians believed that history would justify the superiority of the communist ideology. Nowadays, when the Soviet Union does not exist anymore, many Russian intellectuals believe that Russia will make its big comeback with the spread of Eurasianism. According to Morozova (Morozova, 2011), today “the victory is more a geographical rather than historical matter, or a matter of space, rather than a matter of time”.

One of the most consistent and most significant representatives of the Neo-Eurasian orientation in geopolitics is Alexander Dugin. His geopolitical belief is known as “revolutionary expansionism”, “expansionist imperialism” and “strong expansionist Eurasianism” (Morozova, 2011). According to Alexander Dugin and his followers, the constant power accumulation through territorial expansion is the only appropriate behaviour in a world in which the main characteristic is the eternal fight between geopolitical actors, and especially the geopolitical conflict between forces oriented towards the land and the sea (Tsygankov, 2003).

What is the essence of his geopolitical visions? Dugin presents the Eurasian integration or “restoring the Empire” as a Russian mission, where Russia has the main role as a land of the heartland. According to Dugin, such flow of events is inevitable because of the fact that the control over the continent is not possible without the control over the “geographical axis of history”. If Russia does not succeed in this mission, there are other available alternatives that come to surface, such as: the penetration of China in the North towards Kazakhstan and East Siberia, or Middle Europe could spread towards the Western Russian countries – Ukraine and Belarus. One possible scenario could be the contingent attempt of the Islamic world to integrate Middle Asia, the area around Volga River and Urals, as well as some territories in Southern Russia.

The alliance between Russia, Germany, Japan and Iran is understood by Dugin as an anti-Western block, which should be able to obstruct America’s

penetration towards Europe and Asia (Kilibarda, 2008, p. 57). Besides Alexander Dugin, different forms of Eurasian doctrine and perspectives were articulated by Yevgeny Primakov (Russian Prime Minister from 1998 until 1999) and Gennady Zyuganov. Yevgeny Primakov was one of the few Russian politicians from the era of Boris Yeltsin who was plotting close relations with the Asian powers (Laruelle, 2008, p. 7). Zyuganov is known for his positions on the incompatibility between the Western civilisation and Russia, as well as his position that towards the end of the 20th century, the only alternative to the Western civilisation hegemony is the “Islamic way”, which implies that Russia should establish close relations with the Islamic countries. Taking this into account, the critics state that the worst thing about the “Islamic way” is that it does not exclude the radical Islam countries. In addition, the fact that Vladimir Putin has a Neo-Eurasian orientation is highlighted as well (Bassin, 2008, p. 280). Jean Parvulesco is a French right-wing journalist, who, in 2006, published an essay collection entitled “Putin and Eurasia” (*Vladimir Poutine et l'Eurasie*). This essay collection, among other things, consists of an analysis of Putin's statements at different conferences, summits and visits to other countries. The Neo-Eurasian followers often quote Putin's visit to the Asian Countries Summit - Brunei 2001, where Putin stated that: “Russia has always felt like an Eurasian state” and that Russia would never forget the fact that most of the Russian territory is in Asia, a benefit which Russia has never used in the right way. That is why Putin insists on closer collaboration with the countries from the Asian-Pacific region, especially in terms of creating closer political and economic relations (Laruelle, 2008, p. 7). Western authors point out that, under the mask of patriotism, the Kremlin, led by Putin, conducts campaigns for the “indoctrination” of the state, particularly for the “indoctrination” of the Russian youth with Neo-Eurasian ideas and values (Pryce, 2013, p. 31). Putin's speech held at the Minsk Summit of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, in October 2014, paved the way for the economic segment of the Eurasian movement. In accordance with the agreement, on January 1st, 2015, Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan established the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). On January 2nd, Armenia joined EEU and in May 2015, after the ratification of the agreement for EEU membership, Kyrgyzstan also joined. In his speech, Putin set the trends for EEU's foreign economic action, and in the near future, the EEU should conclude the discussions for signing a free trade agreement (FTA) with Vietnam, as well as starting professional discussions with Israel, India and Egypt. A continuous dialogue with the MERCOSUR and ASEAN member countries must also be established.

However, today the main Neo-Eurasianism apologist is Alexander Dugin. After years of hard work and researches, Dugin managed to create a huge doctrinaire, ideological and strategic apparatus of Russia's Eurasian geopolitical line and to channel the future of the Eurasian Empire. Today, in many Western

scientific works, we can find Dugin's perspectives being analysed as Neo-Eurasian. The Neo-Eurasianism is focused exclusively on Dugin's analyses regarding the geopolitical development.

Since February 2008, Neo-Eurasianism has become steadily embedded in the political consensus in Moscow. Dugin's writings and research activities have inspired some members of the Russian political elite to more seriously deal with the practical implementation of Neo-Eurasianism. As examples, we can point out Vladislav Surkov, who is responsible for setting the idea of "sovereign democracy" and Sergey Karaganov, who has originally designed the so-called "countryman policy".

From 1999 until 2011, Surkov was appointed deputy chief of the Russian Presidential Administration, while from 2011 until 2013 he was deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation. He was regarded as the person in charge of implementing the "sovereign democracy" policy. Basically, the prime political objective was that Russians should define their own democracy while protecting themselves against the foreign values imported from abroad. Russia perceives liberal democracy and Atlanticism as a way of capitulation to the American and European influence, and the acceptance of a specific authoritarian form of social order is considered a recognition of the Eurasian character of modern Russia (Pryce, 2013, p. 32).

Karaganov's doctrine has a significant contribution to the modern Neo-Eurasian frame. Sergey Karaganov was a close associate of Yevgeny Primakov and a presidential advisor to Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin. The foundations of Karaganov's doctrine are mirrored in the view that the Russian Federation should defend the ethnic Russian minorities in the region of the Former Soviet Union, as well as protect them from discrimination whenever necessary.

Karaganov's doctrine is most apparent through the application of the so-called "countryman policy". All those individuals who are not citizens of the Russian Federation, but are either ethnic Russians or speakers of Russian, and above all, are defined as part of the "great" Russian nation, are considered countrymen. Russian Eurasians, who describe Eurasia as a region which for Russia represents the "close neighbourhood", claim that no other country except Russia is capable of imposing its own political dominance in Eurasia. This statement is supported by the fact that the European Union and the People's Republic of China are actually civilisations that are completely separated from the Eurasian civilisation. Thus, Russia is observed as the only logical/natural and unique regional hegemon, and any kind of Chinese, European or American influence would be considered unnatural.

Undoubtedly, Karaganov's doctrine and Surkov's "sovereign democracy" idea are inspired by Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism and by the Eurasianism of his early 20th century predecessors. A very important question concerning Eurasianism is the relation between the church and the state. The church is observed as a

significant pillar of the development of Neo-Eurasianism. At that time, it seemed that the realisation of this pillar was completely impossible. However, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin announced their collaboration in the context of Neo-Eurasianism at the presidential elections in 2012. It is then that the Russian Patriarch Cyril supported Vladimir Putin's presidential candidacy, calling him "God's miracle". This event shows that the relation between the state apparatus in Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church is getting even stronger. Solid examples for this relation are the amendments with which the members of the United Russia Party are planning to change the Penal Code. Namely, provisions regarding the criminal responsibility of all those who would criticise or insult the Russian Orthodox Church, should be implemented in the Penal Code. In this regard, the event when three members of the Russian pop-rock band "Pussy Riot" were detained because of an illicit performance in the Church of Jesus the Savior in Moscow received worldwide media coverage. Besides strengthening the relationship between the church and the state, Neo-Eurasianism has a big impact on the Slavophilism, a movement supported and promoted by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, leader of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia. As we have already noted, Neo-Eurasianism calls for partnership between Orthodoxy and Islam as well. However, as a result of the Chechen separatism, the progress of the Islamic character of Neo-Eurasianism has not reached a satisfactory level yet. Putin's attempts to discuss, at various meetings of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the special position of Russia as an important link between Europe and the Muslim civilisation are also worth mentioning (Pryce, 2013, p. 35).

2.2. Competition between Eurasianism and other approaches in Russian foreign policy

In light of the recent events in Ukraine and the Middle East (Syria and Turkey), we can point to a particular systematic undermining of the Eurasia concept. This means that other geopolitical approaches with a realistic and liberal specificity in international relations have an important role once again. Andrei P. Tsygankov and Pavel A. Tsygankov aptly explain the contemporary nature of the competition of opinions in the creation of Russian foreign policy. In this paper, we emphasise the competitive link between liberalism and realism on the one side, and the Eurasian concept, on the other.

The Russian liberal theory of international relations is much more heavily shaped by Western approaches than by other Russian approaches. Although there are deep divisions and disagreements within Russian liberalism, those who favour following American theories enjoy a position of considerable dominance. In international relations theory, this position of dominance means that the overwhelming majority of conceptual tools are borrowed from Western, particularly American, colleagues. Thus, many Russian scholars treat the world's institutional development as predominantly West-centered. One such

example of this is the conceptualisation of the emerging world as “democratic unipolarity”. The supporters of the concept contend that Francis Fukuyama and Robert Heilbroner were basically correct in arguing the ‘end of history’ thesis which implied the absence of a viable alternative to Western liberalism. The argument implies that Russia too had better adopt Western pluralistic democracy standards if it wants to be peaceful and “civilised”, even if this means granting the US the right to use force.

An example of conceptualising a regional order by Russian liberal scholars is the notion of the end of Eurasia, introduced by the co-director of the Moscow Carnegie Centre, Dmitri Trenin (2001), in his book “The End of Eurasia: Russia on the Border Between Geopolitics and Globalisation”. The concept is a liberal attempt to respond to Russia’s conservative geopolitical projects of integrating the region around Moscow’s vision, and it reflects the “no security without the West” thinking associated with politicians like Yegor Gaidar and Andrei Kozyrev, who held key government positions during the early stages of Russia’s post-communist transformation. The concept assumes that the age of Russia as the centre of gravity in the former Soviet region historically associated with the Tsardom of Muscovy, the Empire, and the Soviet Union is over. Trenin maintains that, because of pervasive external influences, especially those from the Western world, and the West-initiated globalisation, the region of the Russia-centred Eurasia no longer exists. Russia therefore must choose in favour of its gradual geopolitical retreat from the region (Trenin, 2001). Liberal foreign policy concepts reflect a preference for a pro-Western international orientation of Russia. Atlanticism and liberal empire are two foreign policy concepts which support this argument. Introduced by leading liberal figures Andrei Kozyrev and Anatoli Chubais during Russia’s respective decline and recovery, they illustrate the ideological connection we seek to highlight. Kozyrev’s *Atlanticism* assumed Russia’s foreign policy radical reorientation toward Europe and the United States and included radical economic reform, the so-called “shock therapy”, gaining a full-scale status in transatlantic economic and security institutions, such as the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the International Monetary Fund, and G7, and separating the new Russia from the former Soviet republics economically, politically, and culturally. The Atlanticist vision shaped the new foreign policy concept prepared in late 1992 and signed into law in April 1993. The concept of *liberal empire*, articulated by the former Yeltsin’s privatisation tsar Anatoli Chubais, also had in mind Russia’s pro-Western integration, but mostly by means of free commerce and enterprise. Not unlike the early prophets of globalisation, such as Francis Fukuyama and Thomas Friedman, Chubais argued for the inevitability of Russia’s successful economic expansion within the former Soviet region and outside, due to its successfully completed market reform (Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2010).

Realists developed a variety of concepts differentiating between various types of unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar systems and security threats. One such example is Aleksei Bogaturov's proposal to view the post-Cold War international system as "pluralistic unipolarity", in which the unipolar centre is a group of responsible states, rather than one state (the United States). Bogaturov saw Russia as a member of the group and argued for the consolidation of its position within the global centre, as well as for discouraging the formation of one state-unipolarity in the world. His approach to world order included, not unlike the British school tradition, the notions of norms and rules. It also complicated the Self/Other ideological opposition because Russia's Self was expected to develop closer ties with the Other (West), while resisting the tendency of its members (the US) to become predominant in the system.

Defending Russia as a relatively independent power centre, realists pursued the notion of multi-vector foreign policy. A former senior academic and the second foreign Minister of Russia, Yevgeni Primakov, argued that if Russia was to remain a sovereign state with capabilities to organise and secure the post-Soviet space and resist hegemonic ambitions anywhere in the world, there was no alternative to acting in all geopolitical directions. Primakov and his supporters warned against Russia unequivocally siding with Europe or the United States at the expense of relationships with other key international participants, such as China, India, and the Islamic world. Such thinking was adequately reflected in official documents. The country's National Security Concept of 1997 identified Russia as an "influential European and Asian power," and recommended that Russia should maintain equal distancing in relations to the "global European and Asian economic and political actors. The government's official Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 referred to the Russian Federation as "a great power with a responsibility for maintaining security in the world both at a global and regional level" and warned of a new threat of "a unipolar structure of the world under the economic and military domination of the United States" (Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2010).

3. Conclusion

Eurasianism and Neo-Eurasianism are basically created as a reaction to external factors, which were, in significant aspects, very similar. That means that the political collapse of the structure of the Soviet state was accompanied by the geopolitical dissolution of the territory into several sovereign and quasi-sovereign entities. The main question is how to maintain a cohesive civilisation zone on such a divided territory. The imperative of this geopolitical development is actually the answer to the previous question. The final goal would be the possibility to establish a unitary state (more likely an alliance) in the Eurasian geopolitical space. Therefore, close relations with the Caucasus states (with mainly Muslim population) are necessary for creating a consistent geopolitical space.

With regard to the realisation of the Neo-Eurasian ideology, the practical geopolitical action for Russia should enable scientific geopolitical estimation of possible realisation and future development, as well as geopolitical valorisation. The events in the Muslim world (Iran and Syria support) and the Ukraine conflict, which in geopolitics is also known as “small Russia” (protection of Russian minority) are one of the most important geopolitical and security issues concerning the effectuation of Neo-Eurasianism. Besides all political, economic and military consequences, those events have an enormous geopolitical relevance for the future global geopolitical order. We can conclude that the “Empire construction” project depends mostly on the outcome of those events. The Eurasian orientation has been present in Russia for centuries. The contemporary situation may lead the Eurasian idea to become a part of domestic competition for influence in designing Russia’s grand strategy. Analyses of Russian schools of geopolitical thought disclose that there is no full use of the concepts, visions and theories of one separate school. Instead, Russian foreign policy is based on some aspects of all schools of geopolitical thought, which reflects on the realistic evaluation of Russian resources, abilities, and capacities. Geopolitical thinking has always been and will remain a key stone in Russian foreign policy.

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