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Natalia N. Morozova

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*Natalia N. Morozova*¹

CAN THERE BE ETHICAL POLITICS? RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EUROPEAN GEOPOLITICS AND RUSSIAN EURASIANISM

This article aims to explicate the conceptual relationship between two intellectual traditions that informed Russian post-Soviet foreign policy discourse: European inter-war geopolitics and Russian post-revolutionary Eurasianism. It is argued that European geopolitics provided an important theoretical and normative point of departure for Russian Eurasians. The latter took issue with the politics of territorial expansionism underpinning European geopolitics. They therefore attempted to develop an idea of qualitatively different and better politics by subjugating politics to culture.

Keywords: geopolitics, Eurasianism, national identity, foreign policy discourse, Russia

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¹ National Research University Higher School of Economics-Nizhny Novgorod, Faculty of the Humanities, Assistant Professor; E-mail: nnmorozova@hse.ru

Introduction

When a social scientist approaches political discourse as her object of analysis, she is faced with two contradictory normative and theoretical positions. On the one hand, there is the hermeneutical premise that a social scientist must confront her language of explanation with the language of the object's self-understanding, i.e. to apply the discourse's own idea of rationality while modeling it.² In other words, the categories employed and labels imposed by the researcher should be consistent with the object's own criteria of self-identification. On the other hand, there is a critical discursive perspective that looks at how discourses operate, how they are appropriated, who speaks on behalf of who and in the name of which intellectual traditions. More often than not, whole intellectual traditions are reframed and identified with for the sake of attaching a veneer of importance and respectability to particular political arguments. In this case the task of the social scientist should be precisely to resist an interpretive closure, to problematize the conceptual foundations of such self-identification and to restore the tradition to its own conceptual and normative foundations.

If there exists one intellectual tradition whose name became a rhetorical commonplace with Russian political elites in the 1990s, but whose conceptual 'rehabilitation' has been long overdue, it is definitely classical post-revolutionary Eurasianism. Part of the problem stems from the fact that in the hot-house climate of Russian post-Soviet politics the discourse on 'Eurasianism' invariably intertwined with the new rhetoric on 'geopolitics'; Russia's vital geopolitical interests across the post-Soviet geopolitical space were discursively coupled with a renewed Eurasian role, mission and identity. Thus, following the post-1993 change in Russian foreign policy towards greater assertiveness and self-reliance – what some researchers referred to as “geopolitical shift” - academic attention was directed almost exclusively at geopolitics-informed foreign policy prescriptions. Eurasianism, in turn, was dismissed as strategically employed myth-making meant to disguise Russia's true intention of regaining its status as a great power. On the prevalent academic account Eurasianism has no independent conceptual or normative standing. Instead, geopolitics appears to have taken over and exhausted Eurasianism.

How is this conceptualization of post-Soviet Eurasianism projected onto classical post-revolutionary Eurasianism? The latter receives superficial and inadequate treatment because the classical Eurasians' ideas are approached instrumentally, i.e. not on their own terms, but with a view to elucidating the assumptions underlying Russian post-Soviet foreign policy. As a result,

² Charles Taylor, “The Hermeneutics of Conflict,” in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. James Tully (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 226.

when direct parallels are drawn between foreign policy prescriptions of post-revolutionary and post-Soviet Eurasians, the precise scope, direction and ethos of the former remain unclear. Some researchers highlight the anti-European sentiment of the early Eurasians, while others seem to suggest that the early Eurasian approach to foreign policy was dualistic, both western-wary and western-oriented.³ Some scholars emphasize the truly global, the ‘West-against-the-rest’ dimension of the opposition between Russia and Europe in classical Eurasian thinking and the concomitant need for Russia to seek allies in Asia.⁴ Yet, on a more balanced reading post-revolutionary Eurasians were “never inclined to seek significant geographical expansion, particularly toward Europe” because at the heart of Eurasian political philosophy was “a concern with stability of borders and accommodation of ethnically diverse Euro-Asian periphery and domestic population.”⁵

Furthermore, the inherent ambiguity of classical Eurasians’ foreign policy prescriptions generates a lot of conceptual confusion. There are those commentators who unproblematically label Eurasianism past and present “a geopolitical theory”.⁶ Others concur, stating that “while Eurasianism did not identify itself with geopolitics per se, the conceptual affinities linking it with *Geopolitik* in interwar Germany are highly suggestive”.⁷ Yet, on a more cautious and benign account Eurasianism “was at heart a geographic conception of Russian identity”.⁸ Given such disparity in views a question arises: are foreign policy prescriptions a good place to start if we intend to do classical Eurasianism conceptual and normative justice? What is the relationship between identity, geography and foreign policy in classical Eurasianism? Is it just a variation of the classical geopolitical theme? Or did post-revolutionary Eurasians use European geopolitics as their point of departure in order to come up with a qualitatively better idea of politics? These are the questions that will be addressed in this article. I will start by presenting the common academic response to the reemergence of ‘geopolitics’ and ‘Eurasianism’ in Russian post-Soviet political discourse in order to see if the same reasoning can be applied to the relationship between classical geopolitics and classical Eurasianism.

³ Matthew Schmidt, “Is Putin Pursuing the Policy of Eurasianism?” *Demokratizatsiya* vol. 13, no. 1 (January 2005), 93.

⁴ Graham Smith, *The Post-Soviet States: Mapping the Politics of Transition* (London: E.Arnold, 1999), 52.

⁵ Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Mastering Space in Eurasia: Russia’s Geopolitical Thinking after the Soviet Break-up,” *Communist and post-Communist Studies* 36 (2003), 106-110.

⁶ Charles Clover, “Dreams of the Eurasian Heartland: the Reemergence of Geopolitics,” *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 2 (March-April 1999), 9.

⁷ Mark Bassin and Konstantin E. Aksenov, “Mackinder and the Heartland Theory in Post-Soviet Geopolitical Discourse,” *Geopolitics* 11, no. 1 (2006), 101.

⁸ James Billington, *Russia in Search of Itself* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004), 70.

‘Geopolitics’ and ‘Eurasianism’ in Russian post-Soviet Foreign Policy

In the divisive political climate of Russian post-Soviet politics ‘geopolitics’ was hailed as a new, theory-based and non-ideologized blueprint for Russian foreign policy-making. Geopolitical arguments were meant to imbue Russian foreign policy with a sense of consistency and bring about a much-needed domestic consensus behind its conduct. In 1992 Russia’s first Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev expressed his commitment to geopolitics understood as a rational, balanced and non-partisan assessment of Russia’s national interests when he suggested that “the geopolitical dimension of our interests is probably one of the most normal criteria for defining a new foreign policy orientation, with Russia still a missing component of the democratic pole of the Northern Hemisphere.”⁹

Although ‘geopolitics’ was initially rehabilitated, reconceptualized and reintroduced into the official political discourse by liberal-minded politicians, its most ardent advocates and exponents came from the ranks of ‘pragmatic nationalists’ whose ‘centrist’ position based on de-ideologization, pragmatism and the primacy of Russian national interests often spelled ‘geopolitics’.¹⁰ On the one hand, the ‘pragmatic nationalist’ stance that came to dominate Russian post-1993 foreign policy thinking reflected a certain post-Soviet consensus on the importance of abandoning messianic crusading and leaving behind the ideological baggage of the Soviet past. Geopolitics, no longer considered “a school of bourgeois political thought based on an extreme exaggeration of the role of geographical factors in the life of society” or an ideological legitimation of “aggressive foreign policy of imperialism”, was well-placed to discursively reinforce a break with the Soviet past.¹¹ On the other hand, geopolitics responded well to the challenge of democratization which ‘moved’ Russian foreign policy into the centre of a heated public debate highlighting the need to couch political arguments in the language of self-evident, objective truths. Not surprisingly, Russia’s geopolitical interests and geopolitical realities of Russia’s post-Soviet existence were frequently invoked in an attempt to read political arguments off the map and present them as self-evident and objective, i.e. non-debatable.

However, despite being scripted as “objective”, “pragmatic” and, above all else, “new”, Russia’s geopolitics-informed foreign policy was unanimously interpreted by analysts and

⁹ Andrei Kozyrev, “A Transformed Russia in a New World,” *International Affairs (Moscow)*, 38, no. 4 (April-May 1992): 86.

¹⁰ I am relying here on the classification of Russian foreign policy thinking developed in Margot Light, “Foreign Policy Thinking,” in *Internal Factors in Russian Foreign Policy*, Neil Malcolm et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 34-35; See also Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion, and Mythmaking* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 40.

¹¹ *Kratkii Politicheskii Slovar’* [Concise Political Dictionary] (Moscow: Politizdat, 1989), 111, quoted in Pavel Tsygankov, “Geopolitika: Poslednee Pribezhitshe Razuma?” [Geopolitics: The Last Resort of Reason?], *Voprosy Filosofii* 7-8 (1994), 59.

commentators as Russia's return to doing politics as usual. While a rational, pragmatic and interest-based approach implied "pro-Western alignment and integration into the world economy", the actual post-1993 foreign policy consensus amounted to a highly ideologized and therefore thoroughly traditional stance of viewing the West with suspicion, reducing foreign policy to security provision and achieving security through territorial expansion.¹² Characteristically torn between the two Wests – the democratic, liberal West of the Enlightenment and the threatening, military superior West embodied by the armies of Napoleon and Hitler – Russia eventually reverted to a familiar course of perceiving its relations with the West through the prism of strategic competition and political-military rivalry.¹³ It is precisely this reappraisal of Russia-US relations that has conceptually underpinned a "geopolitical" shift in Russian foreign policy.

What does a conceptualization of Russia's post-1993 foreign policy change as a "geopolitical" shift entail? On this reading the geopolitical "strain" once again came to define Russia's relations with its international environment. Despite the hopes that the end of bi-polar ideological confrontation would "emancipate" Russia's truly national interests, their pursuit was soon dominated by a strategic culture steeped in zero-sum geopolitical thinking. From mid-1990s onwards the geopolitical "you win, I lose" mindset and a subsequent view of international politics in terms of conflict and competition started to prevail over benevolent, positive-sum cooperation, especially in Russia's relations with the United States.¹⁴ As a result, power balancing once again came to the fore as the guiding principle of Russian foreign policy meant as a countermeasure against unilateralism and excessive reliance on might in international relations.¹⁵ With relative gains privileged over absolute gains and all pronouncements about values shared by the whole of humanity relegated to the margins of domestic discourse, territory came to be valued as an asset "to be denied to the other so that it cannot be used against oneself".¹⁶ Hence another "marker" of a pronouncedly geopolitical mindset of Russia's post-1993 foreign policy elite – belief in the continuing relevance of spheres of influence for promoting national security and making credible claims to global 'great power' influence on the basis of military-strategic and political pre-eminence in the neighbouring regions.¹⁷ To use the language of discourse analysis, a relation of equivalence is established between Russian post-1993 foreign policy thinking and a supposedly a-historical

¹² Richard Pipes, "Is Russia Still An Enemy?", *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 5 (September-October 1997), 76-77, quoted in Lo, 100.

¹³ Bruce Porter, "Russia and Europe after the Cold War: The Interaction of Domestic and Foreign Policies," in *The Sources of Russian Foreign Policy after the Cold War*, ed. Celeste Wallander (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 125-126.

¹⁴ Lo, 99.

¹⁵ Russia's Foreign Minister Evgenii Primakov, "Rossiia Itshet Novoe Mesto v Mire," [Russia is Searching for a New Place in the World], interview in *Izvestiya*, March 6, 1996, quoted in Lo, 107.

¹⁶ Ole Wæver, "Imperial Metaphors: Emerging European Analogies to Pre-Nation-State Imperial Systems," in *Geopolitics in post-Wall Europe: Security, Territory and Identity*, ed. Ola Tunander, Pavel Baev and Victoria Ingrid Einagel (London: SAGE, 1997), 84.

¹⁷ Lo, 115.

geopolitical mindset in order to explain Russian foreign policy conduct and to make it intelligible to an outside observer.

At the same time, the “pragmatic nationalist” position has been invariably referred to in the literature as “the Eurasian middle ground”, “the Eurasianist alternative” and “Eurasian lobby”.¹⁸ In the run-up to the 1993 parliamentary elections it formed the backbone of a post-liberal foreign policy consensus on the need for Russia to forge a distinct Eurasian foreign policy identity. Given an overwhelmingly Western-centred worldview of Russian foreign policy elites prior to 1993, the emergent discourse on Russia’s Eurasianness provided an important corrective of the naive pro-Western idealism. The US no longer served as the sole reference point for Russian foreign policy-makers due to a perceived distinction between the universality of democratic values and specificity of national interests and due to a growing realization that Russia’s entry into the West-dominated structures and institutions should be a “phased pragmatic process”.¹⁹ National interests could neither be sacrificed for the sake of messianic ideas, as was the case in the past, nor for the sake of an idealized, conflict-free world, unachievable in principle. Adherence to common values does not cancel out differences, especially given different geopolitical realities facing the US and post-Soviet Russia.

As a result, the discursive rationale for invoking Russia’s Eurasian *spetsifika* was two-fold. First, the ‘pragmatists’ in the Kremlin maintained that Russia’s pro-Western bias comes at the cost of marginalizing relations with other, mostly developing, parts of the world. Instead, Russia should steer an independent course in its relations with China, India and the Muslim world in order to address common security concerns and exploit the economic and strategic opportunities that such cooperation presents. Russia’s strategic location at the heart of the Eurasian continent confers on Russia the status of a global player and enables it to conduct mutually beneficial relations with all power centers of modern-day world. Secondly, as the only truly Eurasian power, Russia is capable of performing both a political-diplomatic role of a mediator between the rich industrial nations and the developing countries and a strategic role of a geopolitical “balancer” between East and West ensuring peace, stability and prosperity throughout the Eurasian continent.

¹⁸ On the link between Eurasianism and Pragmatic Nationalism, see Light, “Foreign Policy Thinking”. On the place of Eurasianism within the Russian foreign policy debate, see Neil MacFarlane, “Russia, the West and European Security,” *Survival* 35, no. 3 (1993): 11; Andrew Bouchkin, “Russia’s Far Eastern Policy in the 1990s: Identity in Russian Foreign Policy,” in *The Making of Foreign Policy in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, ed. Adeed Dawisha and Karen Dawisha (Armonk, N.Y.; London: Sharpe, 1995), 67-71.

¹⁹ Kozyrev, “A Transformed Russia”, 86.

To sum up, the geopolitical and the Eurasian themes that underpinned the official pragmatic nationalist ‘compromise’ between unqualified liberalism and fundamentalist nationalism sustained, reinforced and buttressed each other. ‘Geopolitics’ therefore emerged as a discourse on Russian geopolitical security in an attempt to advocate the need for Russia to pursue its national interests on top of or even despite any real or imagined ideological consensus. ‘Eurasia’ - as a synonym of the common post-Soviet space as well as of the continent as a whole - was consequently redefined as a sphere of natural and vital Russian interests in order to shake Russia out of its pro-liberal complacency and to necessitate a pro-active stance befitting Russia as a Eurasian power. In a word, the discursive coupling of ‘Eurasianism’ and ‘geopolitics’ was meant not only to conceptualize the necessity of interest-based foreign policy; it was also meant to lend substance to the very idea of Russia’s national interests and usher in the discussion on what the exact content of Russian national interests must be.

‘Geopolitics’ and Eurasianism in Russian Post-Soviet Foreign Policy: The Academic Response

However, the prevailing scholarly account of the Eurasian – identity construction - component of the official ‘geopolitics’/‘Eurasianism’ constellation dismisses it as instrumentalist ‘cheap talk’ and as a smokescreen for Russia’s renewed imperial ambitions. As has been noted by many Russian foreign policy analysts and observers, the alleged inclusiveness and universalism of Russia’s global Eurasian mission is at variance with a pronouncedly geopolitical mindset that underpins Russia’s Eurasian drive for integration in the CIS.²⁰ In a nutshell, despite all the niceties of Russia’s global mission the operational core of Eurasianism has been the reintegration of the post-Soviet space through Russia’s continuing politico-military primacy in the region.²¹

Indeed, Russia’s active involvement in the social, economic and security issues in the CIS is quite in synch with the geopolitics-inspired need to “carve out” spheres of influence. The discursive inscription of the post-Soviet space as a sphere of vital Russian interests simultaneously recasts it as a sphere of political-military responsibilities and obligations and confers a certain ‘moral right’ to interfere – either on behalf of the Russian-speaking diaspora, or in order to ensure that ethnic conflicts do not spill over onto the Russian territory.²² Eurasian rhetoric with regards to Russia’s role in the post-Soviet space goes far beyond the assertions of good neighbourliness and pragmatic,

²⁰ See, for example, Light’s account of Stankevich’s views in Malcolm et al, 47-48.

²¹ Mette Skak, *From Empire to Anarchy: Post-Communist Foreign Policy and International Relations* (London: Hurst&Co, 1996), 143.

²² Andranik Migranyan, “Vneshnyaya Politika Rossii: Tri Vzgl’yada,” *Moskovskie Novosti*, January 3, 1993, quoted in Lo, 115.

mutually beneficial engagement. In an ingenious rhetorical move reconciling cooperation and coercion Russia assumes a responsibility to ensure Eurasian stability not only through its own economic reforms and democratic revival, but also through leadership in peacekeeping, conflict resolution diplomacy and defence of its smaller neighbours.²³ Finally, on the more assertive edge of the Eurasian political spectrum the ‘near abroad’ operates as a particular space bound up with Russia retrieving its status as a great power and projecting its influence world-wide.²⁴ In the words of one commentator, as long as Russia’s great power status remains a *sine qua non* of the foreign policy debate, Russia’s submission to geopolitics is inescapable; as long as Russia desires to be a great power, it must remain a Eurasian power.²⁵

Given the great power rhetoric underpinning post-Soviet Eurasianism, the many conceptualizations of Russia-Eurasia – as either a cultural and geopolitical bridge between Europe and Asia or as a civilizational “third way” distinct from both – are considered “Protean masks” and disguises for Russia’s great power aspirations meant to attach moral veneer to otherwise a pronouncedly geopolitical mindset.²⁶ Most ominously, the geopolitics-informed understanding of power and security in terms of control over territory is revealed in its crudest in the pragmatic nationalist assertion that cultural and geopolitical uniqueness of Russia-Eurasia is characteristic of the post-Soviet space as a whole. From the vantage point of Russia’s new-found assertiveness and self-reliance in international affairs Eurasian thinking is seen as a “geopolitically constructed and contested exercise in moral justification” rather than a genuine attempt to theorize Russian civilizational distinctiveness. Taking this statement a step further, some commentators suggest that official Eurasianism is devoid of substance and that it was only *Realpolitik* discourse about regaining control over the ‘near abroad’ that reinvigorated the Eurasian idea and lent credence to it.²⁷

Consequently, there has appeared a dominant conceptualization of the official, pragmatic nationalist ‘geopolitics/Eurasianism’ constellation which does not attach any independent normative value to the idea of Russia’s Eurasian identity. Instead, Eurasianism is viewed through the prism of Russian post-1993 foreign policy which has already been conceptualized as ‘good old geopolitics’. With Eurasian identity theorizing brushed aside as either plainly erroneous or blatantly self-serving

²³ Vladimir Lukin, “Our Security Predicament,” *Foreign Policy* 88 (Autumn 1992): 67.

²⁴ Graham Smith, “The Masks of Proteus: Russia, Geopolitical Shift and the New Eurasianism,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24, no. 4 (1999): 488.

²⁵ David Kerr, “The New Eurasianism: The Rise of Geopolitics in Russia’s Foreign Policy,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 47, no. 6 (September 1995): 986-987.

²⁶ Smith, “The Masks of Proteus”, 482-490. See also Kerr, 987.

²⁷ Pavel Baev, “Russia’s Departure from Empire: Self-Assertiveness and a New Retreat,” in *Geopolitics in post-Wall Europe: Security, Territory and Identity*, ed. Ola Tunander, Pavel Baev and Victoria Ingrid Einagel (London: SAGE, 1997), 182.

and taken out of the equation, geopolitics and Eurasianism become coterminous and almost indistinguishable from each other. The discursive link between ‘geopolitics’ and ‘Eurasianism’ does not even feature as part of the analysis because Eurasianism is quite simply “a geopolitical theory” and a variation of the traditional *Realpolitik* discourse.²⁸ Geopolitics as the art of territorial expansion is assumed to have exhausted, subsumed and taken over Eurasianism.

How does this conceptualization of the official post-Soviet ‘geopolitics’/‘Eurasianism’ constellation fare in terms of elucidating the conceptual relationship between classical European geopolitics and classical post-revolutionary Eurasianism? Can the same charge about the absence of ethical intention be levelled against the original Eurasians, who, after all, extensively employed the term ‘geopolitics’? How does foreign policy theorizing link to identity construction in early Eurasian thinking? These are the questions that I will try to address in the second part of my article.

Although never explicitly referred to in their writings, the legacy of classical European inter-war geopolitics provided Russian post-revolutionary Eurasians with a conceptual, even if highly contested, point of departure. What the Eurasians took issue with was the politics of territorial control and expansionism underpinning Europe’s allegedly universalist cultural aspirations. In their view, there was no viable political alternative to colonialism disguised as Europeanization: while effectively combining power and knowledge, it was a breeding ground of national oblivion and mindless Europeanism. Eurasian thinking can therefore be interpreted as a call on Russia to abstain from engaging in international politics because it could compromise the uniqueness of Russia’s identity and the justice of its vision of itself. As a result, Russian post-revolutionary Eurasians resorted to geopolitics as *geography* in order to purge Russian history of all associations with politics as territorial expansion and to ground the distinctiveness of ‘Russia-Eurasia’ in the uniqueness of its physical environment.

A Turn to the East, or the Geography of ‘Russia-Eurasia’

If we trace the historical trajectory of Russia’s debate on Europe, we will notice a singular recurrent feature: every conscious attempt to posit a radical historical break between Russia and Europe and to present their relations in terms of an irreconcilable antagonism required a conceptualization of Russia’s irreducible geographical distinctiveness.²⁹ Eurasianism was a case in point. One of its main proponents the economic geographer Petr Savitskii attempted to identify

²⁸ Clover, “Dreams of the Eurasian Heartland”, 9.

²⁹ See, for example, Nikolai Danilevskii, *Rossiia i Evropa* [Russia and Europe] (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1966).

more precisely the geographical dimension of Russia's unique non-European identity. Despite the long existing tradition of geographical codification, Russia could no longer be divided into two discrete and contrasting - European and Asiatic – parts in the absence of any natural geographical barrier separating the two. Rather, the transcendental nature of Russia's vast territorial expanse was better captured by the designation 'Russia-Eurasia'. It conveyed the idea that Russia formed a unified geographical world unto itself and belonged neither to Europe, nor to Asia. In Savitskii's own words, Russia is indivisible, so that the lands usually presented as Russia's 'European' and 'Asiatic' parts are in fact "identically Eurasian lands".³⁰

Having geographically dissociated Russia from Europe, Savitskii proposes a new division of the continental landmass – the division which positions Europe, Asia and Russia-Eurasia as separate and easily identifiable geographical worlds, as spaces which can be classified on the basis of several geographical features and attributes. First and foremost, 'Russia-Eurasia' is distinguished by the uniformity of its flat, lowland relief as opposed to diverse relief forms of the European and Asian 'extremes' of the old continent. Furthermore, the continental periphery has 'mosaic-like' biogeographical composition, insofar as predominantly forest zones are intermingled here with 'islands' of steppe, tundra and desert. This is not characteristic of the Russia-Eurasian 'core' of the continent. Here forests in the south are separated from forests in the north by a continuous stretch of steppes and deserts. This stretch runs uninterrupted across the continent forming a uniquely Eurasian 'middle world' and contributing to the new Europe/Russia-Eurasia/Asia typology.

However, Savitskii's classification does much more than simply carve out a separate niche for 'Russia-Eurasia' and put it on an equal footing with the rest of the Old World. In fact, the "natural" tri-partite division of the single territorial massif is introduced by Savitskii with a more ambitious purpose in mind – not only to dissociate Russia from Europe geographically, but also – and much more importantly – to do so politically. In fact, the Eurasians were thinking "in threes" because Russia departed from Europe most significantly not due to some immutable features of geography, but on the basis of a qualitatively different historical relation with Asia. While Europe related to Asia through coercion and subordination having historically developed only one way of dealing with difference, 'Russia-Eurasia' represented an alternative political order based on peaceful coexistence, cultural interchange and mutual respect for difference.

³⁰ Petr Savitskii, "Geograficheskii Obzor Rossii-Evrazii" [The Geographical Survey of Russia-Eurasia], in *Kontinent Evraziia* (Moscow: AGRAP, 1997), 279.

To be sure, the Pan-Slav Nikolai Danilevskii made a similar attempt to conceptualize Russia's relations with its internal colonial "others" in non-exploitative and non-violent terms. He insisted that in contrast to the European territorial expansion which involved violence and coercion, Russian colonization was an organic, natural and largely peaceful centuries-long process of peasant settlement, an unobstructed flow of Russian-Slavic colonists into empty lands accompanied by gradual assimilation of indigenous tribes. The resulting historical-ethnographic unity is then translated into geographical cohesiveness in order to substitute Orthodox spirituality as a basis for Slavic unity. However, from the post-revolutionary Eurasian perspective a clear and radical "departure" from Europe could only be complete if politics was conceptualized in qualitatively different terms and 'cleansed' of all vestiges and associations with *geopolitics*, i.e. with territorial expansionism.

As a result, compared to Danilevskii the Russian Eurasians were prepared to go an extra conceptual mile and reverse the imperial geographical dogma by playing the "geography" card for all its objectivist, authoritative worth. If the Petrine policy of Westernization, colonization and Russification rested on Russia's spatialization into the European 'core' and Asian 'periphery' which, in turn, reproduced a newly instituted continental division into Europe and Asia along the Ural mountains, then a conceptualization of a different – morally superior and properly Eurasian – kind of conducting politics and relating to difference had to proceed in the opposite direction. First, as the discussion above shows, the Eurasians position 'Russia-Eurasia' as a self-sufficient and self-enclosed geographical world *in-between* Europe and Asia. Second, in order to distance and detach Russia from European colonial practices, the Eurasians predicate a different, non-expansionist kind of politics and the possibility of mutually beneficial and non-violent relations between the Russians and other Eurasian peoples on 'Russia-Eurasia's *internal* geographical cohesiveness that effectively neutralizes the political distinction between imperial rulers and colonial subjects.

Thus, Savitskii emphasizes the biogeographical composition of 'Russia-Eurasia' that possesses an inner symmetry of its own. Unlike the highly complex 'mosaic' of climatic and biological zones found at the European and Asian 'ends' of the continent, its Eurasian 'core' boasts a certain organizational transparency. It comprises four distinct and tightly integrated ecosystems of tundra in the north, followed by the forest, steppe and desert zones, each of which is distinguished by a particular combination of climatic and soil patterns, flora and fauna. The four adjacent biogeographical regions run ribbonlike in broad, roughly parallel stripes from the

western borderlands across the Eurasian plains, absolutely unaffected by the Urals.³¹ More importantly, particular dependencies between climate, on the one hand, and soils and vegetation, on the other hand, reveal periodicity and inner symmetry which bring 'Russia-Eurasia' together into a single compact and cohesive entity. In particular, Savitskii argues that tundra-forest and forest-steppe frontiers parallel average annual humidity lines which illustrate a decrease in humidity at regular 8% intervals from the tundra in the north to the forests in the central regions to steppes in the south. In addition, north-south symmetry of vegetation and soil patterns ties 'Russia-Eurasia' together into an even tighter geographical unity, as exemplified by an abundance of forests and fertile soils in the centre which is matched by a virtual lack of both in the north and in the south.³²

To recap, the geopolitical designation of 'Russia-Eurasia' as a self-sufficient and self-sustaining "middle world" and as an internally cohesive and homogenous "world unto itself" leaves almost no place for politics of continental-size territorial control. In order to bring violence inherent in any territorial order to a minimum, the Eurasians 'find' 'Russia-Eurasia' on the map through a discovery of patterns of climate zones distribution and symmetries of biogeographical composition. This solution to the problem of politics-as-territorial expansionism laid the groundwork for rethinking Russian history and conceptualizing a qualitatively different and better kind of politics.

A Turn to the East, or the Historical-Cultural Origins of 'Russia-Eurasia'

As the subsequent discussion will show, the geopolitics of 'Russia-Eurasia' was born at the intersection of geography and history. However, instead of linking politics to geography à la Mackinder, i.e. through a particular space-conquering technology employed by the state, the Eurasians envisioned a particular geographical attribute endowing a certain space with a political identity. Instead of persisting as a realm of necessity, 'Russia-Eurasia' emerges as a realm of freedom, as a voluntary association of Eurasian peoples engaged in mutually beneficial relations as well as cultural learning and adaptation.

The realignment of geographical categories in keeping with Russia's new-found Eurasianness paved the way for a radical revision of Russian history. Both Petr Savitskii and Prince Nikolai Trubetzkoy – another co-founder and key inspirational figure of the Eurasian movement –

³¹ Mark Bassin, "Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geographical Space," *Slavic Review* 50, no. 1 (Spring 1991), 15.

³² Petr Savitskii, "Geograficheskie i Geopoliticheskie Osnovy Evraziistva" [Geographical and Geopolitical Foundations of Eurasianism] in *Kontinent Evraziia* (Moscow: AGRAF, 1997), 300.

maintained that the modern Russian state can hardly be traced back to a group of independent principalities located along the rivers connecting the Baltic and the Black seas and subsumed under the name Kievan Rus'. Kievan Rus' did not comprise even a twentieth part of modern Russia.³³ Moreover, it was neither the most economically developed nor the most politically consolidated entity. Kievan Rus' could not maintain trade along its waterways due to frequent nomadic raids and eventually fell prey to the most visionary of ruler around, Genghis Khan. No powerful state could emerge from Kievan Rus', and its historical affiliation with modern Russia is wide of the mark. Still, the question remains: whence cometh the Russian land, and how hath the Russian land arisen?

In the language of contemporary science, the Eurasians put forward a theory more parsimonious and an account of Russian history more methodologically sound than the one suggested by the Slavophiles. The much-idealized Kievan past has survived almost exclusively in Russia's staunch adherence to Orthodoxy, whereas other crucial aspects of historical Russia – its military prowess, politico-ideological foundations and ethnic make-up - remain unaccounted for. Even a cursory glance at the map reveals that the territorial dimension of the modern Russian state can be traced back to the times when Russia was part of the great Mongolian empire founded by Genghis Khan. The Mongol-Tatar yoke was not a temporary suspension of the natural course of Russian history; the latter could hardly resume unaffected after the yoke's "overthrow". To be more precise, there was no such thing as the "overthrow" of the Horde by military force.³⁴ Instead, the spirit and ideas of Genghis Khan were adopted and assimilated by the Muscovite rulers. As a result, the Turanian element transformed the Russian national physiognomy and entered the very foundations of national psyche. The East was no longer a way out of European isolation pragmatically envisioned by the Slavophiles in the aftermath of Russia's defeat in the Crimean war. Nor was it a passive object of Russian political expansion and colonization, as it appeared to Danilevskii and other pan-Slavs. The East was already here and now; it gave Russia a new lease on life and was as much a thing of the Muscovite past as it was a reality of Russia's present.

Having subjugated various nomadic tribes to his power, Genghis Khan transformed the Eurasian steppe into a single nomad state with superb military organization. Subsequently he extended his rule to encompass, through the conquest of the steppe, the rest of Eurasia. The

³³ This is an abridgement of Trubetzkoy's views developed in Nikolai Trubetzkoy, "The Legacy of Genghis Khan: A Perspective on Russian History not from the West, but from the East," in *Legacy of Genghis Khan and Other Essays on Russia's Identity*, ed. Anatoly Liberman (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1991), 161-163.

³⁴ Trubetzkoy, "The Legacy of Genghis Khan", 182.

disastrous short-term consequences of the invasion – the looting and destruction of river settlements – were outweighed in the long run by the pacifying impact of political unification which brought about safety of trade routes and ultimately contributed to the material well-being of settled societies. More importantly, the impact of the Mongol invasion went far beyond the pragmatics of survival and economic prosperity. It confronted Russians with an ethical dilemma and compelled them to search for a new centre of gravity to hold the Russian universe together.

On the one hand, the humiliating reality of a foreign yoke triggered an upsurge of religious feeling which was perceived by Russians as redemption for past sins - the sins that resulted in the calamity of a foreign yoke. The intensity of religious feeling permeated all spheres of everyday life and creative activity, so that during the Tatar rule Orthodoxy enjoyed a following unheard-of in pre-Tatar Rus'. On the other hand, the foreign idea of a centralized state achieving power and security by means of internal mobilization and territorial expansion possessed in the Russian eyes an irresistible lure of universal effectiveness and applicability. However, the Mongolian conception of the state had to be stripped of its Mongolianism and religiously appropriated through Orthodoxy in order to be heralded as one's own, as Russian. The Muscovite synthesis resulted in a win-win combination of the state ideal and Orthodox spirituality.

Ultimately, historical encounters between the Russians and the Turanians produced a unique Slavo-Turanian cultural synthesis whereby more sophisticated Turanian techniques of mastering political space were assimilated and religiously appropriated by the subjugated Slavs. Having seen their lands become one of the provinces of the Mongolian empire, Russians could no longer afford to stick to the “primitive insignificance” of their thoroughly pragmatic pre-Mongolian conception of the state as an umbrella entity securing trade and promoting economic prosperity. At the same time, national revival depended not only on mastering the techniques of the Mongolian state system, but to a greater extent on establishing historical continuity and relating the foreign idea of a state to the already familiar political ideas and ideologies. The source of inspiration was provided by the Greco-Byzantine tradition of political thought which grounded transient political authority in the absolute authority of the Almighty. Genghis Khan related to God in the same manner as the laity and, despite being the supreme earthly ruler, was as much a subject to heavenly will and judgement as his earthly subordinates. By contrast, the Orthodox tsar embodied the will of the nation; he bore responsibility for his people's sins and, at the same time, acted as a channel of divine grace and a champion of God's commandments in the life of the nation. What eventually emerged

from a combination of new politics and old ideology was a religiously sanctioned concept of a nation-state.

At the same time, Trubetskoy is emphatic that together with the “Russification” and religious appropriation of the Turanian state ideal, there occurred a simultaneous “Turanization” of the Byzantine tradition in the process of its revival and subsequent flourishing on the Russian soil.³⁵ In fact, the Russians embraced Orthodoxy and applied it to the conditions of their life in precisely the same way as the Turanians had adopted Islam a few centuries before: they accepted it wholesale and subsequently turned into an overarching cognitive framework encompassing all aspects of their existence – their religious beliefs, their politics and their daily lives. Certain important elements of Turanian ethno-psychology – search for solid foundations, simple schemes and blueprints for action rather than abstract formulas and dogmas - had already been imprinted on the Russian psyche by the time Orthodoxy became the centrepiece of Russian existence. Therefore, Orthodoxy was internalized by the Slavs the way it was, i.e. not as an object of philosophical reflection, but as a self-sufficient philosophical system in its own right, not as school of thought, but as an internally consistent way of life.³⁶ Ultimately, the Orthodox tradition may have become ossified on the Russian soil in the absence of scope for critical reflection and thinking; but it brought about the kind of spiritual discipline and religious unity that manifested its strength through expansion and made Muscovite Russia one of the world's largest powers.

Despite the emphasis on the politico-military aspects of Genghis Khan's legacy, Trubetskoy insists that the Turanian element cannot be reduced to the territorial dimension of the modern Russian state and the accompanying organizational idea of a single Eurasian state. Fraternization between the Slavs and the Turkic peoples transcends the pragmatics of living within a single state; it has resulted in cultural cross-fertilization whereby the Russians inherited the Turanian preoccupation with authority and order and transformed Orthodoxy into a nation-wide guide to religious living. As long as this is the case, the Turanian element enters the very foundations of Russian culture and Russian communal life. To drive the point home, Trubetskoy compares the impact of the Romano-Germanic and the Tatar “yokes” on the indigenous Russian

³⁵ Nikolai Trubetskoy, “O Turanskom Elemente v Russkoi Kul'ture” [On the Turanian Element in Russian Culture] in *Rossia Mezhdu Evropoi i Aziei: Evraziiskiy Soblazn*, ed. Lidia Novikova and Irina Sizemskaja (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), 73.

³⁶ Trubetskoy, “The Legacy of Genghis Khan”, 190-191.

culture and comes to a definite conclusion: given that Bolshevism is a product of two-centuries' old Romano-Germanic "education", the Tatar "school" may not have been altogether that bad.³⁷

At this point we need to take stock of the Eurasian argument discussed so far, because we are being confronted with two mutually exclusive conceptualizations of the link between culture and politics, identity and foreign policy. On the one hand, the Eurasians emphasize the importance of politics in transforming Russian collective identity. They cite the post-Tartar and the pre-imperial phase of Russian history as an example of peaceful and mutually beneficial coexistence of the Russians and Turanians within a single political-territorial order and their joint endeavour to accommodate differences in the name of this order. This historical generalization positing a radical break from both European colonial and Russian imperial practices is consistent with and is buttressed by the tri-partite geographical division of the continent that envisions a possibility of a non-antagonistic relationship between Europe and Asia.

On the other hand, a cultural "turn to the East" could not be complete without establishing cultural 'autonomy' of the Slavo-Turanian synthesis vis-a-vis its political underpinnings. Implicit in Turbetzkoy's revision of Russian history is a contention that a unique Slavo-Turanian culture should be separated from politics that brought it about, be it the projection of the nomad power westwards to subjugate the Russian lands, or the subsequent "gathering" of the lands of the northwest ulus of the Mongol empire by the Muscovite princes. Hence the Eurasians' passionate appeal to national intelligentsias to uncover the Slavo-Turanian origins in the Russian language, folklore, ethno-psychology and political predispositions and activate them in the national consciousness. The transition of culture to metaphysics was complete once the territorial dimension of the Slavo-Turanian synthesis came to be rooted in the constants of Russia-Eurasian geography.

Put differently, the Eurasians first conceptualize the Slavo-Turanian cultural synthesis as a particular intersubjective understanding rooted in common history and politics only in order to subsequently sever the link between identity and politics and assert the primacy of autonomous and self-referential national culture. As a result, a legitimate question arises: why is this the case? In order to answer this question and uncover the roots of the controversy at the heart of Eurasian

³⁷ Trubetzkoy, "The Legacy of Genghis Khan", 76.

thinking we should dwell in more detail on the Eurasians' stance with respect to the politics and culture of Europeanization.

Back to the West, or the Eurasian Ambivalence Regarding Politics

Eurasian anti-Europeanism has already become a truism among researchers and commentators, a byword in need of no further elaboration. However, the Eurasians were far from indiscriminately rejecting all things European; in fact, its leading figures engaged in a lively debate about the dangers and benefits of borrowing European technology. What all Eurasians took issue with was a national mythology with universal aspirations, i.e. a particular way in which European politics, scholarship and cultural self-identification reinforced each other to create a single overarching interpretative framework, a single hegemonic European *Weltanschauung*.

The Eurasians confront head-on the deleterious myth about the universal applicability and supremacy of European culture. Its unity and cohesiveness stems from the bonds of common history and ethnographic, i.e. Romano-Germanic kinship. However, what provides a much greater sense of Romano-Germanic unity is a particular brand of chauvinism which is concealed under the false pretences of European cosmopolitanism. Contrary to the Europeans' own conviction, the universal appeal and mandatory assimilation of European culture are not rooted in the objective demands of logic and reason. They rely instead on pseudo-scientific objectifying techniques that make Europeanization the only cultural-political game in town.

So what has lent a cachet of objectivity to an otherwise subjective ideology in the first place? Following the gist of Danilevskii's argument, Trubetskoy asserts that European scholarship distinguishes cultures of various nations not because they are inherently different, but because they represent separate stages, separate points on the straight line of evolution.³⁸ Some nations have advanced further along the path of world progress because their cultural profile resembles that of Romano-Germans; others began "running in place" at some point and will continue wandering in darkness until they voluntarily surrender their right to cultural self-determination and embark on a policy of Europeanization. Having subjected the European evolutionary scheme to a number of logical tests, Trubetzkoj comes to the conclusion that its alleged scientism is illusory and that there is no and can never be any objective proof of European cultural superiority.

³⁸ Nikolai Trubetzkoj, "Europe and Mankind," in *The Legacy of Genghis Khan and Other Essays on Russia's Identity*, ed. Anatoly Liberman (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1991), 15.

Moreover, the foundations of European self-awareness do not stand up to moral scrutiny either. European scholars lump together the most diverse cultures under the labels “backward” and “primitive” on the grounds that these cultures differ radically from contemporary European civilization. In a word, cultural difference is reduced to sameness and subsequently dismissed as inferiority in order to be subjected to Europeanization by force. Therefore, pan-Romano-Germanic chauvinism should be condemned as an immoral and antisocial frame of reference that “destroys every form of cultural communication between human beings.”³⁹ Europeanization should follow the demands of reason, not the shadow of a gun. The allegedly self-evident historical law of Europeanization – law to the extent that it is based on universal human rationality – does not operate automatically; it is enforced through resort to violence and coercion associated with great-power *Realpolitik*. The definition of politics as technical control and subordination which, in turn, rests on technological superiority is therefore castigated by Trubetzkoy as both an evil and an exclusively European practice.

To recap, on the Eurasian reading, European politics and culture participate in a self-legitimizing cycle: the efficiency of European colonial practices produces Europeanization as the universal law of cultural advancement. European universalism couched as “progress”, “civilization” and “democracy” then authorizes the use of force against culturally inferior “others”. This self-legitimizing logic inevitably pits European inter-war geopoliticians against Russian post-revolutionary Eurasians.

However, as this study attempted to show, the Eurasian’s own solution to the problem of politics-as-territorial control contained ultimately proved untenable and was at the heart of Eurasianism's failure as a political movement and ideology. If ‘Russia-Eurasia’ held a promise of ethical politics based on a qualitatively different relationship between ‘self’ and ‘other’, it could hardly be rooted in geography which has no room for such a relational concept of identity. Denouncing the politics of geopolitics with the help of geopolitics as geography effectively meant envisioning no possibility of politics whatsoever. On the level of historical narrative the Eurasians seem to suggest that identities/cultures can *never* be constituted or maintained *outside* the political sphere. However, Eurasianism as political ideology amounts to an opposite conclusion: politics must be put to the universal test of promoting national culture/identity whose constitution is *exogenous* to the political sphere in order to discredit and delegitimize the universal rationality of colonialism cum Europeanization.

³⁹ Trubetzkoy, “Europe and Mankind”, 9-10.

Conclusion

Despite the prominence of the ‘geopolitics’/‘Eurasianism’ constellation in Russian post-Soviet foreign policy discourse, there is still a dearth of studies that focus on the intellectual roots and points of departure of post-revolutionary Eurasian thinking in their own right. More often than not, classical Eurasianism is approached instrumentally with the aim to elucidate the assumptions informing Russian post-Soviet foreign policy thinking. As a result, the conclusions reached with regard to Russian post-Soviet foreign policy are projected onto post-revolutionary Eurasianism. Thus, viewed from the vantage point of the failure of post-Soviet Eurasianism to develop into a blueprint for Russian foreign policy, Eurasianism past and present is reduced to geopolitics. It is exposed as a thoroughly self-interested and self-serving stance that does not contain even a modicum of ethical intention. This article attempts to contribute to the study of classical Eurasianism and of Russian intellectual history in general by explicating the conceptual relationship between European inter-war geopolitics and Russian post-revolutionary Eurasianism.

Long before the ‘power/knowledge’ nexus entered the parlance of social sciences the Eurasians were criticising European scholarship for couching what was essentially a nationalist ideology with universalist aspirations in the language of objective, neutral and progressivist science. In this scheme of things cultural difference spelled inferiority to be controlled, mastered and moulded in the European image. From this point of view European inter-war geopolitics provided a highly contentious conceptual and normative point of departure for Russian post-revolutionary Eurasians who predicated their idea of ethical politics on respect for difference. However, the Eurasian solution to the problem of politics-as-territorial control proved untenable. In their attempt to oppose the universal rationality of Europeanization the Eurasians came up with a universally valid test of ethical politics. Its sole rationale was to promote unique national culture. This conclusion amounted to postulating the primacy of ethics over politics and of identities being constituted *outside* the realm of politics. In a nutshell, a search for ethical politics produced a perfect match between the unique Slavo-Turanian culture and the geography of ‘Russia-Eurasia’ that left no place for intersubjectivity, relations and, ultimately, politics.

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Natalia N. Morozova

National Research University Higher School of Economics (Nizhny Novgorod, Russia). Faculty of the Humanities, Assistant Professor;

E-mail: nnmorozova@hse.ru; Tel. +7 960 1818 762.

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