

‘Middle Continent’ or ‘Island Russia’: Eurasianist Legacy and Vadim Tsymburskii’s Revisionist Geopolitics

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Russia’s reaction to Ukraine’s political upheaval and in particular its Crimea gambit have raised anew the question about Russian national identity and the goals of the country’s foreign policy. Moscow’s brutal violation of Ukraine’s territorial integrity and its defiant rhetoric with references to the ambiguous notion of *Russkii Mir* (Russian World) – a geopolitical vision that ostensibly compels the Kremlin leadership to act as protector of all “Russians and Russian-speakers” irrespective of where they live, thus placing a stronger emphasis on ethnic rather than civic understanding of Russianness – appear to mark a clear break with the policies pursued over the previous 20 odd years, when Russia’s conduct seemed to be based on two main pillars: upholding international law in its foreign policy and seeking to build a civic nation of *rossiiane* in its domestic politics. But if this radical shift did indeed take place, what is it that Russia is now striving to achieve? What is its ultimate strategic objective? Do we now have a better sense of what is the nature of the supposedly “new (ethnic-based) Russian identity” and how the latter will help shape the country’s international behavior?¹

It would appear that Vladimir Putin sought to shed some light on these issues in his speech at the July 1, 2014 gathering of Russian ambassadors in Moscow (Putin 2014). Yet this attempt to clarify the situation should be regarded as a failure. What Putin’s remarks actually revealed is that both Russian identity and the country’s foreign policy are in flux. The only thing that was crystal clear was that Russia’s resentment against the West reached a new high, but other than that Putin’s address did not contain any signs of a coherent and comprehensive foreign policy strategy. Neither did it make clear, what is Russia’s place in contemporary world. Likewise, the question of what Moscow is up to in its Eurasian neighborhood remains moot. On the one hand, Putin

1 For an argument advancing the thesis that recent transformation of Russian national identity has indeed led to the emergence of the new foreign policy doctrine, see Zevelev (2014); Garton Ash (2014).

seemed to put a premium on realizing the project of ethnic solidarity with *Russkii Mir*; yet on the other, he was equally enthusiastic about pursuing the ambitious project of Eurasian integration.

However, pursuing both projects simultaneously seems impractical as their objectives are hardly compatible (Trudoliubov 2014).² At the heart of policy contradictions is the way the governing elites conceive of Russia's national identity. A dominant strand in their self-understanding is the vision of themselves as being simultaneously the heirs of the Russian Empire and of the Soviet Union – an outlook that, as one commentator noted, correctly, is itself rather contradictory (Pastukhov 2014). The wariness of the West, pining for “historic Russia,” which is perceived as an “organic and unique civilization,” and *derzhavnichestvo/velikoderzhavnost'* (extreme statism combined with great-power status)³ are those features of the Kremlin leadership's political mindset that seem to have an affinity with some ideological constructs of classical Eurasianism. Indeed, Eurasianism appears to be all the rage in contemporary Russia (Clover 2016). “Today,” one commentator notes, “during Vladimir Putin's fourth term, it is one of the best known and most frequently mentioned political movements of the [interwar] period” (Pryannikov 2014). Eurasianism, however, appears to be conceptually inadequate to help Russia's ruling elites to deal with the growing public stirring based on the ethnic understanding of Russianness (Kolstø 2016a): ever greater number of Russians want to live in a culturally homogeneous “Russian national state” and are loath to act as donors for a quasi-imperial multiethnic “Eurasian” entity.⁴ To respond to the challenge presented by ethnic nationalism, the Kremlin ideologues have come up with an eclectic vision of Russian national identity that combines, in a mechanical and ad hoc manner, some Eurasianist tropes (the image of Russia as

2 Some analysts contend that the Russian leadership has already made its choice in favor of one project – that of the “gathering of Russian ethnic lands.” As Tatiana Zhurzhenko argues, “the annexation of Crimea and the threat to use all means necessary, including military intervention, to protect the rights of Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine, indicated that the Kremlin prioritizes the violent ‘gathering of ethnic lands’ over interstate integration” (Zhurzhenko 2014).

3 A recent policy paper stated bluntly: “Let's face it... We simply like to play an important role in the world. We should not coyly repudiate *velikoderzhavnost'*. It does exist; over 300 years of imperial history it has become deeply imbedded in the national value system” (Likhacheva & Makarov 2014, 30).

4 According to the December 2013 survey of the Levada Center, a well-respected independent pollster, 66% of respondents support the slogan “Russia for the Russians,” 71% agree with the nationalist call “Stop feeding the Caucasus,” and 78% want tougher regulation of migration (Dergachev 2014).

gosudarstvo-tsvilizatsiia) (Tsygankov 2016) and the elements of ethnonationalist thinking (a claim that Russians are the “state-bearing people”).⁵

But what is behind the recurrence of Eurasianist imagery and are there more innovative ways of engaging Eurasianist intellectual legacy? This paper is going to discuss one such attempt at taking a new look at the body of work produced by the émigré Eurasianist thinkers which resulted in an incisive and boldly original critique of classical Eurasianism. Keeping my focus on the nexus of identity, geopolitics and foreign policy, I intend to do three things: to investigate how national identity, geopolitical imagery and international conduct are connected; to explore the reasons for the persistence of the “Eurasian visions” in present-day Russia; and to reflect on how the Eurasianist modes of thinking and theorizing space left their mark on the geopolitical constructs of some of the most sophisticated intellectual opponents of *Evrasiistvo* (in particular, by examining the geopolitical views of Vadim Tsymburskii), while placing this discussion within a broader context of the debates on Russian national interest.⁶

Here I follow into the footsteps of the contemporary scholarship in the field of spatial history that seek to “interrogate a crucial characteristic of national identity – geographical territory and its symbolic meaning.” Edith Clowes explains in her recent book why it is worthwhile to carry out such interrogation. “The geographical metaphors dominant in current discourse about identity,” she points out, “convey the sense that *who* a Russian is depends on how one defines *where* Russia is” (Clowes 2011).⁷

My main arguments are as follows. While resurrecting the idea of “Russia-Eurasia” (as it was conceptualized by the classical Eurasianists in the 1920s) proved quite handy in post-Soviet Russia in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union’s disintegration, this “Eurasian” orientation appears to be encountering growing opposition – particularly on the part of Russian (ethnic) nationalists. There is a tension between the “*imperial*” connotation of the notion of “Eurasia” – clearly visible in Vladimir Putin’s pet project of the Eurasian Union – and the clamoring for the establishment of Russian *national* state. This tension is reflected in the apparent disconnect between Russia’s foreign policy and its domestic politics. The Kremlin’s strategic goal of Eurasian

5 Such eclecticism was on full display in Vladimir Putin’s programmatic article “Russia: the national question” (Putin, 2012).

6 For a thoughtful discussion of the notion of national interest in Russian historical context, see (Mezhuyev, 2015; Pavlovskii 2015; Filippov 2015; Lukyanov 2015; Saradzhyan 2015; Yakovenko 2008; Pastukhov 2000; Mezhuyev 1999).

7 For a cogent analysis of the reasons for the growing appreciation of the importance of (Russian) geographical space, see Bassin et al. (2010).

integration aimed at ever closer association with the ex-Soviet countries and seeking to uphold free movement of goods, capital and people across the vast Eurasian expanse seems out of synch with the rising domestic concerns over the massive influx of “culturally alien” migrants and resultant xenophobic sentiments. The ambitious vision of Russia-led Eurasia that constitutes one of the world’s main poles of power and is able to successfully compete with other poles (such as the European Union, the United States and China) and the vociferous claims to shut down Russia’s borders with most of its Eurasian neighbors and toughen the country’s immigration laws clearly work at cross purposes. The bold image of Russia as integrator and leader of the “Middle Continent” appears to be increasingly challenged by the more isolationist image of “Island Russia.”

Debating Russian Identity

Speaking to David Remnick in the spring of 1996, Georgii Satarov, a Yeltsin advisor who would soon be charged with the task of elaborating a Russian national idea, made a revealing remark:

When totalitarianism was being destroyed, the idea of ideology was being destroyed, too. The idea was formed that a national idea was a bad thing. But the baby was thrown out with the bath water. Our Kremlin polls show that people miss this (Remnick 1996).

More than fifteen years later, Sergei Karaganov, in an article entitled “Why Do We Need National Identity,” basically echoed Satarov’s old concerns:

People were bored to death by the very notion of ideology after 70 years of communism. We hoped society would produce a new identity and ideology on its own. But this was wishful thinking. We parted with the Soviet identity, and the memory of the Great Patriotic War remained our only national idea. Nothing new was created... we still don’t know what history we should associate ourselves with, whether we are an independent but peripheral part of Europe, and whether we want to become this... Even more urgent is the question of who we want to be and where we (the majority of the Russian elite and the general public) want to go (Karaganov 2013).

And recently one Moscow liberal media outlet summed it all up as follows:

The painful transition from the defunct Soviet empire toward the new independent Russia has lasted for a long quarter century. So far, however, the search for a national identity appears to be at an impasse (Ot redakt-sii 2013b).⁸

Now, how does the confusion over identity relate to Russia's international behavior?

IR scholars and political analysts have long disagreed as to what are the key drivers of Russian foreign policy, what is the latter's relationship to nationalism, and what role ideational factors play in shaping the Russian conduct. The representatives of *liberalism* would point to the crucial importance of Russia's domestic political philosophy at any given time – whatever its concrete historical content. For their part, the “*realists*” would counter by contending that, historically, Russia has almost always been a pragmatic international actor, whose conduct was largely driven by traditional concerns – above all, the matters of security and material interest – while remaining mostly unaffected by ideology or nationalist sentiment. Seeking to reconcile these opposite approaches, the third school – the *constructivists* – suggests that rather than seeing the internal and external factors as being antithetical they should be understood as being “dialectical and mediated subjectively via the policy process.” Indeed, they ask, what does the notion of “national interests” actually mean? The latter, being externally projected, “are themselves always *subjectively* defined through the prism of domestic nationalism – a state can only agree on such interests if national identity itself is defined” (March 2011, 190).

The thing is, though, that more than 25 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union the post-Soviet Russia's identity is *not* clearly defined.⁹ It would appear that Russia's quest for great power status and deep-seated anti-Western sentiment stemming from “a feeling of *obida* (injury) at perceived humiliation by the West” (Sherr 2009, 205) that allegedly denies Russia the coveted recognition of equal status act as the substitutes of a clear-cut self-understanding and the (emotional) basis for policy formulation. And this brings me to the classical Eurasianism and its resurrection in the 1990s.

8 For a comprehensive survey of the Russian thinkers' perspectives on the “Russian Idea,” see *Natsional'naia ideia* (2012).

9 As contemporary Russian analysts note, “Russia has found itself in a rather difficult situation: since 1917, a Soviet identity was imposed on the country, while a pre-Soviet identity was systematically destroyed. Now the last remnants of Soviet identity are dying out, but a pre-Soviet identity was not brought back. In fact, it could not be brought back in its entirety” (Likhacheva & Makarov, 2014, 26; Kortunov, 2009, 5-15).

Visions of “Eurasia”

Searching for the reasons of Eurasianism’s seemingly sudden reemergence following several decades of complete oblivion seems to be a no brainer. One cannot fail to notice structural similarities between the two Russian “catastrophes” – one in 1917 and the other in 1991. At the turn of the 21st century, as in the early 20th century, the ideologically disoriented mass publics lived through the collapse of the imperial state and Russia’s loss of its great power status. In a situation of the radically redrawn borders Eurasianism with its creative “imagined geography” appeared just what the doctor ordered.¹⁰ Yet probably no less important was the psychological and emotional atmosphere that these geopolitical cataclysms produced in their wake. “After all,” notes Roger Griffin writing about the first of these cataclysms that erupted in the late 1910s, “this was a period when not just the political and economic, but the psychological and spiritual foundations of modern life were regularly shaken by seismic aftershocks following the collective trauma of the First World War” (Griffin 2011, 21). Remarkably, the Eurasianists’ older contemporaries Nikolai Berdyaev and Vasily Zen’kovsky (both fellow émigrés) placed a special emphasis on the Eurasianist “catastrophic worldview” and the movement’s psychological underpinning. “Eurasianism is first of all an *emotional*, not an intellectual movement,” Berdyaev contended. “Its emotion is a reaction of creative national and religious instincts to the catastrophe we endured” (Berdyaev 1925, 134). For his part, Zen’kovsky asserted that “Not ideology, but *psychology*, is essential and influential in Eurasianism” (Zen’kovsky 1953, 106). Georgii Florovskii, one of Eurasianism’s founding fathers and one of the first critics of the movement, also contended that Eurasianist theorizing was largely driven by strong emotions. “In Eurasian patriotism,” he wrote, “one can hear only the voice of blood and the voice of passion, wild and intoxicating” (Florovskii 1928, 312). Psychology and emotions have undoubtedly played no small role in shaping the mindset of post-Soviet Russians, many of whom could not fail to immediately recognize the Eurasianists of the 1920s as their spiritual soul brothers. Thus there seems to be an interesting parallel between the Eurasianists’ acute

¹⁰ It would seem that an interesting parallel can be drawn between the resurrection of Eurasianism in the 1990s Russia and the fascination with geopolitics in the 1920s Germany. “The catastrophic trauma of the world war and the wrenching transformations it produced in German society and Germany’s international position,” one scholar argues, “fed a new fascination with the role of geography in precipitating the tragedy” (Murphy 1997, 1). For a broader comparison between Weimar Germany and “Weimar Russia,” see (Starovoitova 1993; Yanov 1995; Hanson & Kopstein 1997; Shenfield 1998; Kopstein & Hanson 1998; Luks 2008).

dislike – if not outright hatred – of the West and the present-day Russian elites' deep *ressentiment* towards the leading Western powers, in particular the United States (Medvedev 2014).¹¹

However, one should not underestimate the complexity and richness of the Eurasianist ideas. There are several important dimensions or facets of the classical Eurasianism: *geographical/geopolitical* ("Eurasia" conceived as a self-contained "Middle Continent," a unique civilization, and the "world onto itself"); *historical* ("Russia-Eurasia" as a state entity born out of the slow unraveling of the "Mongol Commonwealth"); *imperial* ("Eurasia" as a synthetic culture and polity created by the brotherly Eurasian peoples); *national* ("Eurasia" as a natural *mestorazvitie* [developmental space] of the Russian people and the arena of the future triumph of Orthodoxy); and *political* ("Eurasia" as an illiberal polity ruled by a powerful idea with the governing elite regarding themselves as its custodians ("ideocracy")).

Thus, Eurasianism can be variously presented as a specific *type of Russian nationalism* (the only "true" nationalism as opposed to the multitude of false ones); a *conservative ideology* (that would critique European liberal values); or as a *modernist /anti-colonial movement* (that resurrected the discourse of 19th century Romanticism and adapted it to contemporary conditions) (Glebov 2010; Laruelle 2008; Shlapentokh 2007b; Wiederkehr 2007; Vinkovetsky 2000).

To get a better handle on the complexity (and ambiguity!) of the Eurasianist "system," its emergence and evolution should be contextualized (Torbakov 2015a; Luks 2009; Bassin 2003). The classical Eurasianism has emerged within a specific historical context: the movement was mostly shaped by the upheavals of the 1917 Revolution, the unraveling of Russia's multiethnic empire and its eventual reassembling – in a radically different guise – by the victorious Bolsheviks. Thus, Russian imperial entanglements, the relationship between nationalism/nationalisms and the reality of empire were at the heart of the Eurasianist discourse. Its linchpin has been a powerful image of "Russia-Eurasia": by advancing this image, the Eurasianists attempted to merge empire and nation, to craft – through a notion of "Pan-Eurasian nationalism" – an overarching "Eurasian" identity, whereby its subject will be diluted in a

¹¹ Notably, Sergei Karaganov hailed the seizure of Crimea not least because with this move "Russia has put a limit to a nearly quarter century-long creeping military as well as political and economic expansion [by the West] into the spheres of its vitally important interests – in fact, the Versailles policy "in a velvet glove" – that spawned humiliation and the desire for revenge among the substantial part of the country's elites and mass publics." The annexation of Crimea (or in Karaganov's wording, its "unification with Russia") "provided a serious treatment against [Russia's] Weimar syndrome caused by Western policy." (Karaganov, 2014).

supranational construct. It was a desperate and intellectually audacious attempt, as some students of the classical Eurasianism nicely put it, “to save the empire through its negation” (Riasanovsky 1967; Glebov 2003).

Yet this powerful image contained a paradox or a crucial contradiction that Eurasianism was never able to resolve. This paradox was noticed and critically analyzed already in the 1920s by two perceptive observers (and one-time Eurasianists) Petr Bitsilli and Georgii Florovskii (Bitsilli 1927; Florovskii 1928). In fact, the image of “Russia-Eurasia” contained not one but *two* national and political projects, seemingly working at cross purposes. (These were “two facets” of Eurasianism, according to Bitsilli, “viable each in its own way” and aimed at the “ideal of Orthodox Rus” and at the concept of the “federation of territories and peoples,” respectively.)

Indeed, one was the vision of “Eurasia” as a multiethnic community, a synthetic culture created by the Eurasian peoples united by common space (the system of interwoven *mestorazvitiya* [spaces of development]¹²) and their common destiny. The other vision, however, was quite different. All leading Eurasianists were deeply religious people and viewed Orthodoxy as the central factor of Russian cultural life and as the crucial spiritual resource for Russia’s moral rebirth in the aftermath of the revolutionary turmoil. For them, Orthodoxy was what created Russia’s ethnic/civilizational distinctiveness in the first place and gave Russians superior moral authority. Based on this perspective, “Russia-Eurasia” acquired a new meaning: as an “individuation” of Russian Orthodoxy that would ultimately nurture the culture of the *entire* Eurasian continent. To make such a fanciful prospect look viable, the Eurasianists came up with a flimsy concept of “potential Orthodoxy” whereby the diverse peoples of Eurasia (whether pagan, Buddhist or Islamic) are cast as “potentially Orthodox.”

Thus, we have, on the one hand, a seemingly pragmatic project of the national-federal organization of the Eurasian space (with its specific ideocratic axis of Pan-Eurasian nationalism) and, on the other, a clear manifestation of Orthodox universalism (based, naturally, on a different type of ideocracy). The two could not, and did not, mesh well. (Notably, Florovskii and Bitsilli each have chosen one image of “Russia-Eurasia” and rejected the other. Predictably, Florovskii opted for Holy Rus’, while Bitsilli for the Eurasian federalist vision.)

Indeed, recent scholarship on Eurasianism demonstrated that, all their flirting with “multiculturalism” notwithstanding, the Eurasianists ultimately failed to supplant Russian nationalism with a more inclusive national identity (Glebov 2008). At the end of the day, all their attempts to rethink national identity

12 For a good analysis of the concept of *mestorazvitie*, see Bassin (2010).

aimed at overcoming ethnic exclusivity have yielded to their strongest desire: to preserve at all costs “historic Russia” – the Russian empire – even if under the different name.

The Eurasianist Imagery and the Dilemmas of Russian Foreign Policy

The Soviet Union’s collapse – a massive geopolitical cataclysm that led, among other things, to the loss of empire, ideological vacuum, and an acute identity crisis – gave Eurasianism a new lease on life in post-Soviet Russia. Ever since the early 1990s there goes on a lively debate on to what extent the assumptions, arguments and images that are part of Eurasianist discourse shape contemporary Russia’s self-understanding and play a role in foreign policy formulation. Some analysts contend that for present-day Russia Eurasianism is a strategic dead end, and that we are currently witnessing “the end of Eurasia” (Trenin 2002). Others argue the opposite, maintaining that Eurasianism represents post-Soviet Russia’s principal ideology and the intellectual wellspring of its foreign policy strategy (Lane 2014; Barbashin & Thoburn 2014; Chaudet et al. 2009). But the discussion of whether Putin is or is not a diehard Eurasianist (he is definitely not¹³) is largely beside the point. What really matters is that Eurasianism has introduced a new paradigm and a new vocabulary which enables new possibilities for (re)imagining history and geographical space. By virtue of being sufficiently vague and impressionistic, Eurasianist doctrine is very flexible, conceptually as well as discursively. It is precisely the intellectual richness and conceptual ambiguities inherent in the Eurasianist canon that encourage policymakers to draw upon it in the process of crafting and implementing Russia’s strategy. “Eurasia” is being used, as Graham Smith put it, as “a protean mask” for legitimating various stances on foreign policy (Smith 1999).

Casting Russia as a non-Western great power, supporting the notion of “multipolarity,” rejecting the Western hegemonic discourse of “universal values,” upholding the “civilizational” approach and championing the vision of the world as one consisting of “civilizational blocs” (Tsygankov 2017) – which includes Putin’s vision of an emerging Eurasian Union (Lukin 2014b) – are just

13 It gradually dawned even on Aleksandr Dugin, one of the most ardent supporters of Russian president’s recent policies, that Putin’s approach to nationalism is essentially a very pragmatic and instrumentalist one. “Before, we could have an illusion that Putin himself is a Eurasian patriot, a defender of Orthodox identity,” Dugin said. “His hesitation now [to invade Ukraine] is a sign that he has followed this line by some pragmatic calculations, by some realistic understanding of the politics” (Sonne 2014).

cases in point. Russia's recent programmatic documents provide a good snapshot of the governing elite's strategic thinking. It is the firm conviction of the Russian leadership that the main essence of the current period of global history lies in the "consistent development of multipolarity." The main building blocks of what Russian strategists call the "new international architecture" are regional integration associations. It is noteworthy that the "regionalist trend" is given a clear civilizational connotation (Lukin 2014a). It is asserted that under the current conditions the significance of "civilizational identity" is being enhanced – a factor that in its turn prompts the world's leading powers to form "various civilizational blocs" (MID RF 2013; Lavrov 2013).

Russia's top politicians have long argued for closer integration between Russia and several other post-Soviet countries – a process that should ultimately lead to the formation of the "Eurasian Union." From Moscow's standpoint, the vision of the emerging Eurasian Union is strategically very important. According to the Kremlin's geopolitical outlook, Russia can successfully compete globally with the United States, China or the European Union only if it acts as a leader of the regional bloc. By bringing Russia and its ex-Soviet neighbors into a closely integrated community of states, Russian strategists contend, would allow this Eurasian association to become one of the major centers of power that would participate on par with other such centers in global and regional governance.¹⁴

Russia's entire Ukraine debacle is the direct result of the Kremlin being hell bent on bringing Kyiv into the Eurasian fold and on preventing the West from getting a "strategic bridgehead" on the territory of *Russkii Mir*. "Some sort of [Western-sponsored] geopolitical project was formed that started on Maidan," Russian foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov asserted. "This is really a geopolitical project with the intent of taking over the Ukrainian geopolitical space, and doing so at the expense of Russia's interests, at the expense of the Russian and Russian-speaking population of Ukraine itself" (Lavrov 2014). In Moscow, Ukraine has long been seen as a lynchpin of Putin's pet project of the Eurasian Union. Indeed, historically – in Russia's 1910s debates on empire and nation, in the immediate aftermath of the 1917 upheaval and again following the 1991 Soviet disintegration, as well as in today's discussion of the Eurasian integration – Ukraine has been perceived by Russia's rulers as an absolutely pivotal state. Without 40 million plus Ukrainians who would associate themselves with Russia-Eurasia (or, in Putin's preferred term, Russian "state-civilization") there could be no "Eurasia" as a geopolitical reality (a crucial "Euro" element will be

14 For a representative collection of Russian perspectives on Eurasian integration, see Liik (2014).

missing) and no Staatsvolk – the Greater Russian nation comprising also the other Eastern Slavs (Ukrainians and Belarusians) – to effectively rule these vast expanses. Note that in all his recent speeches Putin reiterated that Russians and Ukrainians are one people – the backbone of the broader “Russian World.”¹⁵ The latter notion was specifically designed to supplement the concept of the “Eurasian Union,” with the emotive imagery of *Russkii Mir* seemingly amplifying an ethno-cultural dimension of Moscow’s geostrategic blueprint (Laruelle 2015). Here, however, we have yet another example of the Kremlin trademark ideological ambivalence. Russian leadership tends to play the nationalist card very cautiously and with only one goal in mind: to perpetuate their stay in power. Thus Russia-sponsored *Russkii Mir*, as some astute analysts argue, is not so much a transnational “community of ethnic Russians or societies committed to Russian culture” as, indeed, a specific “civilization” – an “unwesternizable” and “unmodernizable” one that is based on distinctly “un-Western” principles: “disdain for liberal democracy, suppression of human rights, and undermining the rule of law” (Shekhovtsov 2014; Inozemtsev 2014). Whoever shares such a philosophical outlook belongs to *Russkii Mir* and is also a prospective member of the “Eurasian Union” as this association represents, in the words of one pro-Kremlin ideologue, an explicitly “non-Western model.” “The culture and values of many former Soviet republics,” Aleksandr Lukin asserts, “really do differ from what prevails in the West,” (Lukin, 2014b) whose dominant “ideology of secular liberalism... will meet with increasing resistance and aversion” (Lukin 2014a).

Yet the Kremlin-led drive towards Eurasian integration is counterbalanced by the trend towards disengagement that reflects the profound shift in Russian public attitudes. In the minds of the growing numbers of Russians, millions of labor migrants (mostly from the Caucasus and Central Asia) working in the large Russian cities came to be increasingly associated with drug smuggling, other types of criminal offense, and violence. Migration is a complex phenomenon across the board, and it plays a particularly controversial role in the relations between Russia and ex-Soviet nations. On the one hand, migration provides one of the strongest links connecting the Russian society with those in post-Soviet Eurasia. But on the other hand, it acts as a major irritant,

15 The idea that Ukraine is absolutely central to Russia’s self-understanding is wide-spread among Russian policy elites. “Strictly speaking, the very notion ‘Russia’ is not applicable to the new state formation [the Russian Federation] since Russia emerged as a result of the unification of all formerly Russian lands. Without Ukraine and Belarus, Russia ceases to be Russia in the strict sense of this word,” argued Sergei Kortunov. Thus, he concluded, “the idea of Russianness is forever tied up with the Kievan roots and Kievan sources of Russian national statehood” (Kortunov 2009, 273).

fostering alienation and enmity between different ethnic communities and giving a boost to Russian nationalist sentiment and xenophobia.¹⁶ It is noteworthy, however, that the social forces engaged in the critique of migration are much broader than the pockets of Russian skinheads. In fact, the discussion of the migration's impact on Russian society is increasingly becoming an important element of the discourses of Russian foreign policy and of Russian identity.

Domestic critics of the Kremlin strategy point out its compensatory, “quasi-imperial” function. Instead of resolutely rethinking Russia as a nation-state and sorting out the country's “true” national interest, Moscow continues to be mired in the ambiguous phase of “postimperium” – still desperate to assert its regional privilege and attain great power status. Yet the “Eurasian integration” that results in “swamping” Russia with millions of laborers from Central Asia and the Caucasus is precisely what prevents Russia from transcending the “post-imperial” stage and finally forming a non-imperial identity, critics of the Kremlin policies contend. While radical demographic changes that the massive migration is bringing in its wake make the task of building the Russian nation ever more difficult, the “Eurasian” geopolitical orientation distracts Russia from what some critics consider as the country's “true historical task” – building *Russian* civilization. Thus, one Russian analyst notes, “domestic considerations dictate the need to control, contain, erect protective barriers and detach from the region, with which Russian society no longer feels a cultural continuity” (Matveeva 2012).

Vadim Tsymburskii's Geopolitics

Remarkably, such an isolationist perspective – or, as one commentator put it, a “Russia First” approach (Matveeva 2012) – could well be the result of a quite different reading of the Eurasianist canon. A body of work produced by the late Russian geopolitician Vadim Tsymburskii (1957–2009) is an interesting example in this regard.¹⁷ While Putin has famously characterized the Soviet Union's collapse as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of our epoch, for Tsym-

16 Sociological surveys register the steady growth of the number of Russians who believe that the “settling in Russia of the representatives of other nationalities” constitutes the main threat for the country (Ot redaktsii 2013a). A recent poll by the Levada Center found that 84% of respondents support the introduction of a visa regime for citizens from Central Asia and the South Caucasus (Ot redaktsii 2013c).

17 For a good general overview of Tsymburskii's (geo)political thinking, see Mezhuhev (2012); Mezhuhev (2017); Tsygankov (2015); Khatuntsev (2015).

burskii, the same event was a blessing in disguise. "Russia enters a very promising epoch" – such was a sentence that concluded what has proved to be his most celebrated piece – the 1993 essay *Island Russia* (Tsyburskii 2007a, 27). Already in the early 1990s, during the first years of post-Soviet Russia's "infancy," he said elsewhere, "I acutely realized that this shrunken Russia is my country in which I want to live" (Tsyburskii 2009, 102).

Tsyburskii had a very complex intellectual relationship with Eurasianism (Vakhitov 2015): there have been both a sharp critique and multiple borrowings. Unlike Aleksandr Dugin, who appeared to have upheld one "facet" of the classical Eurasianism – the metaphysical one – and who continues musing on the sacred "Heartland Russia" and the "Orthodox Empire,"¹⁸ Tsyburskii offered a much more innovative reinterpretation of Eurasianism.¹⁹ Two developments – the disintegration of the Soviet empire and Russia's embracing of modernity in the course of the 20th century (even if in an alternative form) that also included secularization – have opened up the way for getting rid of Eurasianism's most outdated aspects and for suggesting what Tsyburskii called a "secular geopolitical project."

In a nutshell, this project looks as follows. The Soviet Union's unraveling revealed a "core Russia" whose geographical contours strikingly coincide with those of 17th century Muscovy after it absorbed Siberia – the move that Tsyburskii deemed absolutely central for Russia's identity formation. It is not fortuitous that the 16th-17th centuries also saw the emergence of Russia as a distinct civilization – the rise of the "unique humankind on its own soil." (As Tsyburskii asserted, this distinct Russian civilization arose when the Russians came to understand that "*We* are the unique humankind, and *they* are a source of all our problems.")

Russia is *not* Eurasia. But Eurasia does exist: it comprises a long arc of the so called "stream-territories" stretching from the Baltics in the West to Manchuria in the East and including the New Eastern Europe of Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova; South Caucasus, and Central Asia. These "stream-territories" separate Russia from the other major "civilizational platforms" – European (Romano-German) in the West, Islamic (Arab-Persian) in the South, and Sinic (Chinese) in the South-East. It is this arc of the Great Periphery (or Great Limitrophe) containing, in Tsyburskii's words, "the peoples [squeezed] between civilizations" – i.e. those who failed to form distinct civilizations of their own

18 On Dugin's geopolitics, see (Umland 2012; Shekhovtsov & Umland 2009; Shlapentokh 2007a; Ingram 2001). For an analysis that counterposes Dugin's and Tsyburskii's geopolitical concepts, see Morozova (2009).

19 For Tsyburskii's critique of Dugin's geopolitical theorizing, see Tsyburskii (2007e).

(Tsymburskii 2007b) – that constitutes the Eurasia of today. Conceptualized in this way, Russia comes out not as a “Continent-Ocean” of the classical Eurasianism, but rather as the “Island Russia” surrounded by the long band of the Great Periphery.

Tsymburskii deployed this model and his “Island” metaphor for revisiting Russia’s imperial history of the 18th – 20th centuries whose central content, he argued, was a whole series of “kidnapping of Europe.” At the very beginning of its imperial period in the early 18th century Russia committed a mortal sin, having imagined itself as part of Europe. This unfortunate imagining led to its entanglement in the politics of the core European peoples (Romano-Germans) – mainly through its projecting power onto the European civilizational platform and taking part in European geopolitical contests. To be able to project power it had to absorb and incorporate the “stream territories” separating it from Europe. This development, in its turn, led to the gradual diluting of Russia’s own civilizational foundation as it opened its doors to the mass of people who “were [culturally] alien and who had no clue about Russia’s civilizational interests and principles.” With the Soviet Union’s breakup, the ensuing distancing from Europe and the reemergence of the Great Periphery shielding Russia from all sides, the “exuberant *pseudomorphosis* of its imperial age” – here Tsymburskii borrows Oswald Spengler’s term – has finally ended, and Russia can now safely repair to its Island. “Russia is leaving the ‘stream-territories’ and returning to ‘its own turf,’ to ‘its Island,’ while restoring maximal distance from the other Euro-Asian ethno-civilizational platforms” (Tsymburskii 2007a, 22).

Having defined *what* Russia is through determining *where* it is, Tsymburskii spelled out his understanding of Russian national interest and unveiled his strategic blueprint for Russia’s domestic politics and foreign policy. Internally, he argued, Russia faces a two-pronged task: finalizing Russia’s modernization (building a “solid urban culture”), and revitalizing Russia’s core areas, above all Siberia. This task could be achieved through: 1) the strengthening of internal market, 2) the technological renovation spurred by spiritual revival, and 3) the strict control the people would exercise over the elites – the “moral enserfment of the elites,” as he put it.

Externally, Russia should: 1) eschew any global commitments, try to stay away from the clash between the West and the Rest, and take care only of those who voluntarily associate with it; 2) support U.S.-dominated “one-and-a-half-polar world,” while seeking to frustrate any attempts to establish a full-blown Pax Americana; and 3) control the Great Periphery around Russia, preventing any other major power from establishing its strategic dominance there.

While there are clear divergences between Tsymburskii’s ideas and the classical Eurasianists’ outlook, there are also significant similarities:

- Fascination with Russia's 16th-17th-centuries Muscovite period. (Tsymburskii repeatedly called monk Filofei – the author of the famous letter addressed to the Great Prince Vasily III that had characterized Moscow as the “Third Rome” – “my dear Filofei” and “my hero.”)
- Civilizational approach, the understanding of “Island Russia” as a largely self-contained world, as well as the acute anti-Europeanism.
- Similar to Eurasianists, Tsymburskii has advanced his own “Exodus to the East” – stressing the utmost importance of Russia's “own Orient” – Siberia and the Far East. (In fact, he repeatedly suggested moving Russia's capital to Novosibirsk in Western Siberia (Tsymburskii 2007c).
- Not unlike classical Eurasianists, Tsymburskii was not only concerned with Russia's “own Orient” which has to be integrated into imperial/federal space, but also with Russia's “internal West” – the westernized intelligentsia, who has yet to undergo a kind of “mental revolution” eventually compelling it to renounce pernicious Westernism.²⁰

Basically, Tsymburskii's relationship with Eurasianism can be summed up as follows: the historical process has irrevocably resolved those paradoxes and dilemmas in the Eurasianist “system” that Eurasianists themselves failed to reconcile. The empire is no more, the vicious cycle of Russia's serial “kidnapping of Europe” appeared to have run its course, and Russia is now firmly ensconced on its Island thus reclaiming its true geopolitical niche that it took up back in the 17th century – at the moment it first realized that it constituted a distinct civilization. So the task is to approach the Eurasianist ideas creatively, discard what is clearly passé, and draw instead on the new vocabulary opening up new ways for imagining space that the classical Eurasianism introduced. And that is precisely what Tsymburskii did.

²⁰ As Russian radical nationalists see it, the problem of Russia's “internal West” has become more acute following the Ukraine crisis and growing tensions between Moscow and the Western world. Some nationalist writers demand immediate and “serious rotation of political elites,” referring to what they call “internal Donbas” – a community of “true Russian patriots” who helped the insurgents in eastern Ukraine to establish a secessionist enclave – as the agent of positive change. “The next generation of Russian citizens will be living in a situation of permanent confrontation between ‘internal Donbas’ and ‘internal West,’” contends the nationalist commentator Yegor Kholmogorov (Kholmogorov 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, several remarks on the relationship between Tsymburskii's geopolitical ideas and the evolution of Russian nationalism will be in order. Tsymburskii was eagerly taken on board by the so called "new wave" of Russian nationalists (in particular, by the group that styled itself as the Young Conservatives led by Mikhail Remizov and Boris Mezhuyev in the mid-2000s) with whom he rubbed shoulders until his untimely death in 2009. His geopolitical thinking has had a significant influence on their discourse of Russian nationalism (Torbakov 2015b).

As the Young Conservatives' leading ideologues see it, contemporary Russian nationalism finds itself in a difficult situation: it has to wage war on "two fronts" – against the advancing "empire" of the global world order *and* against the phantom of Russia's defunct empire (Remizov 2012). The thing is that the antinomy of "national idea vs. empire" (as basically constituting two different principles of legitimating power) has long defined the very content of Russian historical consciousness and until very recently appeared irreconcilable. It seemed intractable not only as a subject of controversy within the Russian conservative nobility who were keen on preserving both the empire and the social hierarchy of the Russian *Ständegesellschaft*, but also as an internal dilemma of early modern Russian nationalism itself. All Russian discourse on nationalism from the Decembrists to Petr Struve to Alexander Solzhenitsyn testified to this (Wortman 2001; Wortman 2013).

Yet history itself resolved this dilemma for Russian nationalists. First, the empire has disintegrated. Second, Russia simply lacks resources for the legitimation of imperial/supranational power – as both dynastic and "ideocratic" principles are missing. Finally, following the Soviet Union's implosion, Russia has been profoundly reconfigured geographically: having shed its imperial dominions, Russia has shrunk down to what Tsymburskii called "its pre-imperial cultural and geographical core with solid and absolute Russian [ethnic] majority" (Tsymburskii 2007a).

These developments have radically changed the correlation between "national" and "imperial" projects in Russian history. In the past, argues Mikhail Remizov, Russian nationalism has served as a kind of "reserve historical project" for Russia and Russian people: it coyly manifested itself at some turning points of the country's history but was in no position to seriously challenge the imperial mainstream. But now there is no imperial project that could be an alternative to the national project. What remained are only the imperial phantom pains (Remizov 2012).

Like Tsymburskii, the Young Conservatives believe that the main obstacle that prevents Russian nationalism from becoming triumphant is the lack of national-minded elites who would uphold common good and true national interest (Est li u Rossii natsionalnaia elita 2010). At best, present-day Russia is run by a tiny clique, which, driven by the instinct of self-preservation, understand that to perpetuate their elite status they have, at a minimum, to “preserve the state within its current borders.” But as for the “big ideas,” there are none. It is not surprising, however. Tsymburskii himself once labeled the current political regime as the “Great Russia Utilization Inc.”²¹ Yet the new elites that would supplant today’s “anti-national” ruling group are likely to emerge in the process of political struggle between Russian nationalists of various political leanings. “Nationalism,” Stanislav Belkovskii notes, “is the greatest hidden and suppressed energy in Russia” (Quoted in Galimova 2014). Nationalist paradigm, some of Russia’s most astute analysts contend, has become the main framework within which the country’s political development will be taking place. From now on, political battles will be fought not between liberals and *derzhavniki* but between nationalist liberals and nationalist *derzhavniki*, between Russian right-wing nationalists and left-wing nationalists (Pain 2013).

Whatever the differences between these two camps, both share a rather dim view of “Eurasian integration.” True, the ongoing Ukraine crisis and Moscow’s aggressive response to it produced multiple and contradictory reactions on the part of Russia’s nationalist milieu (Kolstø 2016b). Some segments of ethnic and civic nationalists appear to be greatly impressed by the manifestation of “people’s power” in Ukraine and seek to distance themselves from the Kremlin’s vicious anti-Ukrainian propaganda campaign and its reckless military adventures. While supporting the need to safeguard political and cultural rights for the Russians in Ukraine, some Russian nationalists note Putin’s hypocrisy: the Kremlin leader’s sudden concern with the issue of self-determination of the Russian-speakers in Ukraine seems to contradict his intent to suppress any genuine political competition within Russia itself. At the same time, the annexation of Crimea was enthusiastically supported by both “imperialists” and the bulk of ethnonationalists – albeit for different reasons: while the former see the move as a step towards the rebuilding of the empire, the latter back it as an example of the successful Russian ethnic irredentism.²² However, most

21 “What kind of political regime do we have? What are its main characteristics?” Tsymburskii asked. He suggested that it resembled a closed joint-stock company. “The administrative bodies of this closed joint-stock company are busy utilizing imperial assets within the borders of the Russian Federation” (Tsymburskii 2002).

22 Although the seizure of Crimea did cause a steep spike in nationalist sentiment, most analysts argue that “patriotic euphoria” will not last long. According to Belkovsky, “the

Russian ethnic and civic nationalists seem to agree that to try to prevent further social degradation of Central Asian societies is senseless, to seek alliance with them against the backdrop of the deepening of negative social trends in those countries is counter-productive, and that to pursue integration and form association with what are in essence “nationalizing states” pushing against all things Russian is simply immoral (Inozemtsev 2013). Such a stance prescribing restraint and disengagement appears to be in full agreement with an early warning uttered by Tsymburskii more than two decades ago. “Of all possible temptations that Russia may face today,” he wrote presciently in 1994, “the most dangerous ones, I believe, are the lures of the “Third Rome” idea,²³ of the “gathering of the [Russian] lands,” and of the “integration of [post] Soviet space” (Tsymburskii 2007d, 33).

Although Tsymburskii was not a liberal thinker, his geopolitics helped shape the views also of some of Russia’s prominent liberal-minded analysts such as Dmitri Trenin. In his *Postimperium*, Trenin characterized Tsymburskii as “one of the most original and deep contemporary Russian thinkers” and appeared to agree with him that Russia is indeed a kind of “island in the Eurasian ocean.” He also shares Tsymburskii’s idea that the territorial contraction of “historic Russia” could be a good thing after all as it would stimulate an alternative to the country’s traditional imperial path of development. The emergence of the post-imperial rather than the neo-imperial Russia – a Russia “which the world has never seen before,” notes Trenin, – would mark a radical change in the country’s conduct: it would stop expanding outwards and start focusing its gaze inwards (Trenin 2012, 67; Trenin 2011). As Russia is facing isolation due to growing tensions with the West, this inward-looking trend is likely to strengthen and can even prove to be a blessing in disguise. “Russia may use the growing isolation from the West as a stimulus to address its glaring weaknesses, starting with education, science and technology,” Trenin argues. “If it manages to survive the isolation, stand its ground and improve its ways, it will gain enough self-confidence to back up its great-power ambitions” (Trenin 2014b).

Being sharply critical of the Kremlin concept of the “Russian World” – an ideological construct with an obvious neo-imperial strand – liberal nationalists suggest a new bold “Russian” policy that appears to be in tune with Tsymburskii’s thinking. Russian interests will be much better served, they argue, if

Crimean events channeled it [nationalist energy] into the pro-Kremlin direction, but this cannot continue ad infinitum” (Quoted in Galimova 2014).

23 While Tsymburskii very much sympathized with monk Filofei’s 17th-century vision of Russia as the Third Rome, which was essentially defensive and isolationist – an Orthodox Island in the Sea of apostasy – he was very critical of 19th-century interpretations of this idea that were largely messianic and expansionist.

instead of trying to “integrate” former Soviet borderlands or seeking to establish control over them through maintaining “managed instability” on their territory, Moscow will craft a smart repatriation policy. Mass resettlement from ex-Soviet republics into Russia of Russians, Russian-speakers and whoever associate themselves with Russian culture, the argument goes, will be hugely beneficial both economically and politically. National economy will receive a badly needed dynamic and high-skilled workforce, while simultaneously diminishing its reliance on the millions of semi-literate Central Asian migrants who are deemed by many Russians to be culturally alien. So the guiding principle of the liberal-nationalist version of *Russkii Mir* is this: “rather than gathering further lands, Moscow needs to gather people” (Trenin 2014a; Inozemtsev 2014).

On balance, for the majority of Russians today, “Island Russia” appears to be a more appealing image as well as a more effective geopolitical metaphor than that of “Middle Continent-Eurasia.”²⁴ Yet the very production of these diverse images seems to involve an intense engagement with the Eurasianist canon. This should come as no surprise: like the 1920s émigré intellectuals, contemporary Russian thinkers are confronted with the same formidable task – how to forge a Russian identity that would be both culturally inclusive *and* non-imperial. Ultimately, Russia’s international conduct will be influenced by how this dilemma is eventually resolved.

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24 These preferences seem to be reflected in the recent publication in Russia’s leading foreign policy journal of an article penned by one Russian senior diplomat. The piece is entitled “Island Russia.” Curiously, the author didn’t refer to Tsymburskii and his geopolitical ideas even once (although he mentions the novel “Island Crimea” by Vasily Aksyonov), but the article’s arguments are quite similar to Tsymburskii’s. The most important common feature is the “idea of an ‘Island’ as a solid monolithic structure in the midst of the tempestuous ocean of [global] changes” (Spassky 2011).

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