



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Regnr Östersjöstiftelsen: 3/12

Project manager: Mark Bassin

Project title: The Vision of Eurasia

1. Purpose of the project

The purpose of this project was to evaluate the degree to which the ideological concepts, arguments, and tropes of Eurasianism have penetrated across public and political life in Russia under the regime of Vladimir Putin. Originally formulated by Russian émigré nationalists in the 1920s and 1930s, Eurasianism represented an entirely new vision of Russia as “Russia-Eurasia”: a distinct and autonomous historical world stretching from Russia's western borderlands east to the Pacific. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, these old doctrines were rediscovered and began to be resurrected by the leading political movements in the 1990s, including the “Liberal Democrats” led by Vladimir Zhirinovskii and the Communists led by Gennadii Ziuganov.

By the beginning Vladimir Putin's first presidency, Eurasianism was becoming an increasingly common term of reference in Russia. Putin's presidential party *United Russia* drew heavily on Eurasianist arguments and lend them an even greater respectability. Party strategists borrowed from these ideologues their geopolitical theories as well as their promotion of a neo-conservative ideology. Putin himself dramatically set the tone for this attitude with his pronouncement, in April 2005, that the collapse of the USSR represented “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century,” and in his campaign for a 3rd presidential term in 2011 he officially called for the formation of an “Eurasian Union” made up of the states of the former Soviet Union.

Eurasianist postulates have permeated Putin's patriotic ideology in different ways. This is particularly notable in the emphasis laid upon the idea of Russia as a “great power” (*derzhava*) whose national interests naturally confront those of Europe and the USA—a perspective which fits closely with the Eurasianist notion of essentialized global civilizations. The most critical questions at the center of public debates in Russia today—national identity, Russia's status as a world civilization and a Great Power, its relations with the West and with the rest of the former Soviet Union, the rise of Asia (particularly China), and Russia's response to the pressures of globalization— all can be and are eagerly refracted through a Eurasianist prism.

While it was identified above all as a political orientation and perspective, Eurasianism under Putin began to proliferate into cultural, academic and social discourses as well, and it figured increasingly prominently in representations of Russia in popular culture. This proliferation was the focus of our project: to trace how Eurasianist concepts, arguments, tropes, and perspectives have penetrated across public and political life in Russia today. Different subprojects examined: the relation between Eurasianism and Russian domestic and foreign policy; Centre-Periphery relations in Russia; formal academic discourses (history, geopolitics, ethno-politics, “culturology,”; public debates about national identity; the Russian Orthodox Church; and finally popular culture and artistic production. (literature, cinema, art and music).

2. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them



1. The results of the project provide considerable insight into a vital element of what is called the “political technology” of the Putin regime in particular and “managed democracy” more broadly. This is the manufacture, deployment, and on-going management of so-called ideological projects as a means of shaping and controlling political discourses, attitudes, and behavior. We documented how after around 2010 the Putin regime began to embrace elements of the ideology of Eurasianism, which up to that point had existed essentially on the extremist fringe of Russian politics. The most important point of this was to provide the basis for a new political relationship between the Russian Federation to the newly-independent states of the former Soviet Union, which would be consummated in 2015 with the formal establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union. While we followed this political evolution carefully, the main attention of our project traced how Eurasianist perspectives and interpretations were proliferated and projected—either by the government itself or at least with its deliberate and active support—across popular culture academic scholarship, and more diffusely debates about Russia’s national and civilizational identity. The result of all this was the effective “normalization” of Eurasianist discourses and their secure establishment as one vital parameter for Russia's self-image and its self-understanding.

The particular task of Putinist political technology was not however to promote a single ideological project, but rather to embellish and disseminate different projects, which address different issues and situations using alternative perspectives and rationales. While this was not at the center of our original research design, the project ended up investigating in considerable detail the resonances and tensions between Eurasianism and an alternative ideological project, the *Russkii Mir* or Russian World. Both of these are multi-faceted narratives of Russian identity, but where Eurasianism described Russia as a part of a greater supranational and civilizational entity that was geographically determined and included other, non-Russian peoples, the Russian world is defined more strictly by standard ethno-national criteria, above all the factor of the Russian language and culture. While the Putin regime articulated Eurasianism and the Russian World in regard to different political contexts and imperatives, they inevitably crossed lines as they entered public discourses and stimulated debates and disputes that the regime could not have anticipated and actually served to undermine the appeal of both. This was apparent most clearly and significantly in regard to discussions of the relationship of Russia to Ukraine, for which Eurasianism and the Russian World competed as legitimating narratives.

2. Despite the clear endorsement of Eurasianism as a valid platform for Russian identity by Vladimir Putin and the Russian political establishment overall, our project revealed the ambivalent resonances of Eurasianism with more standard and traditional expressions of Russian nationalism. On the one hand—and very surprisingly for us—the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has proved receptive to many of the principles of Eurasianism. Since the early 1990s there has been a broad revival of ROC religious practice in the Russian population, and Eurasianism has played a structuring role by providing key ideological impulses for the new political strategies and religious statements that today dominate the Russian scene. An important source of this positive resonance is the fact that the ROC leans heavily on the same sort of geopolitical analyses developed by Putinist Eurasianism. In particular, we noted a strong correlation between Eurasianism and the Patriarchate’s narrative of Orthodox civilization

On the other hand, there are various examples where Eurasianism was resisted and rejected by movements and doctrines that claimed to offer a more genuine perspective on Russian national identity. In our work, we identified three of these in particular. One of these was



Russian ethno-nationalism, which maintains that the Russian nation is a ethnic community defined by a particular shared language, and a specific ethnic character (understood sometimes, although not always, in racial terms). Eurasianism however is explicitly poly-ethnic and includes Turkic, Mongolian and Finno-Ugric groups in addition to Russians. For this reason, it is condemned by Russian ethno-nationalists as a betrayal of Russia's national interests.

A particularly extreme example of this that we studied was Russian *rasologija*: a post-Soviet attempt to define the Russian nation as a separate biological race, in the spirit of German *Rassenkunde* or racial science. *Rasologija* is vehement in its denunciation of Eurasianism, which comes out very strongly in its critique of Lev Gumilev, the Soviet historian and ethnographer most responsible for keeping Eurasianism alive in the USSR. Finally, we considered the critique of the philosopher and geopolitician Vadim Tsymburskii, who rejected the expansionist international dynamic inherent in post-Soviet Eurasianism in favor of strict isolationism. Arguing in the spirit of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Tsymburskii maintained that Russia today should not seek to control or even combine with the former Soviet republics, but rather should maintain an isolationist profile and focus exclusively on developing its internal potentials.

3. Despite the great emphasis on the ideological novelty of Putinist Eurasianism, and its obvious adaptation to the conditions and needs of the present day, our project identified a number of underlying continuities that connect it back to Soviet attitudes and practices. Indeed, these backward linkages mean that an important part of Eurasianism's appeal is precisely as means of keeping the Soviet tradition alive—albeit by using a conceptual arsenal that is apparently very different. A significant indication of this can be seen in the enduring reverence for the work of Lev Gumilev, a Eurasianist scholar of the late Soviet period who died in 1991. In many respects, Gumilev's work implicitly translated Soviet norms into perspectives that were appealing and acceptable in a post-Soviet context.

One source of continuity is the idea implicit in the Putinist project that Eurasianism, as a universalistic perspective and total *Weltanschauung* or world view, can replace Marxism-Leninism as a state ideology. The argument is that Eurasianism, like Marxism-Leninism, can both rationalize and legitimate the current state of post-Soviet politics and society at the same time that it can reliably identify the imperatives for future policies. There is furthermore a clear continuity with Soviet practice in regard to strategies for managing the relations of the many different nationalities that make up the population of the Russian state. From the 1930s to the 1980s, the official position on this question was the so-called *Druzhiba Narodov* or “friendship of the peoples,” a policy which maintained the same primordial friendship and harmony between the Soviet nationalities that is at the center of Eurasianism. Finally, of course, the explicitly anti-Western position underlying the civilizationist narrative of present-day Eurasianism is a continuation of Soviet hostility toward the *kapstrany* or capitalist countries during the Cold War.

3. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

The work of the project has highlighted a key element of the Eurasia concept, namely its remarkable flexibility as a geographical or spatial imaginary. Effectively, Eurasia can operate in a coherent fashion on at least three different geographical scales:

a) On the level of the *Russian Federation*, Eurasia represents a powerful identity platform for national “republics” such as Tatarstan, Sakha, Tuva and others. While these entities are very diverse, they all claim an Eurasian identity as the basis for what is in fact a



contradictory position: on the one hand to distinguish themselves clearly from the (European) Russians while at the same time establishing their legitimate claim to equal enfranchisement as a part of the polity and society of the Russian Federation.

b) The same strategy operates at the level of *independent countries*. Within the former Soviet Union, Kazakhstan in particular embraces a Eurasian identity to both distinguish itself from Russia while at the same time to establish its parity with Russia as equally-enfranchised members of a common civilizational-historical and political community. A different example is Turkey, for which the self-identification as “Eurasian” carries with it a different array of political resonances and rationales. Along with this, of course, Eurasia can refer collectively to the assembly of post-Soviet states, as in the formally-organized *Eurasian Economic Union*.

c) Finally, the novel concept of *Greater Eurasia (Bol'shaia Evraziia)* has become popular in recent years in very broad reference to the general Asia-Pacific region. This new signification of the concept serves a vital political function as an ideological rationalization for Russia current policy of deepening its integration in this region, above in the form of a bi-lateral partnership with China.

In a different connection, our project revealed how Eurasianism acts as an important element for the development of conservative and radical-conservative politics. This is very obvious in Russia, of course, both in terms of its central position as an ideological foundation for Putinism but also in its more specific appeal for influential conservative thinktanks such as the Valdai or Izborskii Clubs. At the same time, Eurasianism provides a broad discursive field on which the European far right can engage with and in a sense join forces with Russia. Indeed, Eurasianism has emerged as probably the principal ideological arena for this engagement, as can be seen in the enthusiasm and interest of the European far right in Britain, France and Germany for the work of such Russian Eurasianists as Aleksandr Dugin or Lev Gumilev

4. New research questions that the project has led to

As an identity discourse, one of the most striking characteristics of Eurasianism is the fact that constructs a putatively national vision by combining or amalgamating a variety of distinct national entities. In this sense, a Eurasianist “national” identity is more accurately “meta-national” or indeed “supranational.” While the specific example of Eurasianism is certainly unique in many respect, this general tendency to blur the distinction between the national and the supranational is a common feature of nationalist discourses as they are formulated in the 21st century. One clear expression of this is the new significance of “civilizational” dynamics in the narration of national identities. Eurasia itself, as our project demonstrated, is presented in civilizational terms, while in West European nations, “Europeism” has become a central feature of self-identification.

The work of the project also reveals the central role that the valorization and signification of geographical space—in the form of spatial or geo-imaginaries—plays as part of political and identity discourses. The materialization of the discursive subject by locating it on a geographical map and drawing boundaries around it acts in a very special manner to galvanize the discourse and give it a compelling immediacy. To be sure, this materialization is only apparent, for in fact the spatial imaginary is in all important respects malleable and negotiable. The boundaries can be drawn in very different ways, and even within a single geographical configuration the entity in question can reflect a variety of political colorations: it can be progressive or reactionary, isolationist or globalist, and so



on. While Eurasia once again provides a unique example, all identity discourses in principle are built on spatial imaginaries, the flexibilities of which are similarly revealing of the discourse's inner dynamics and tensions.

5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

Throughout the life of this project over the past decade or so, political life and events in Russia and Eastern Europe have been shaped—directly and, in some cases, tragically—by processes and dynamics connected with “The Vision of Eurasia” that was our subject. Two examples in particular are significant. On the one hand, Russian-Ukrainian relations have been affected not only by Eurasianist discourses but much more directly by the practical political project that built upon these discourses, namely the creation of a Eurasian Economic Union in 2015. In the run-up to this, Putin's Russia wanted Ukraine to join this Eurasian association, but ultimately the leadership in Ukraine refused and opted instead for a westward orientation to the European Union. This was the immediate basis for Russia's intervention into Ukraine in 2014, both the annexation of Crimea and the quasi-occupation of the Donbas region. We can see the ultimate result of this in the present day, as Russia's mounts a full-scale invasion of Ukraine to destroy its European aspirations and force on it a Eurasianist and Russo-centric orientation.

At the same time, the discourses that we have examined have been implicated in the development of Russian policy on the other side of the country, namely the Pacific Far East. In this regard, the geo-imaginary of Eurasia was modified once again and expanded in the form of what is called *Bol'shaia Evraziia* or “Greater Eurasia”, which now extends beyond the boundaries of the former Soviet Union to include all of Central and East Asia, China most prominently of all. While the geographical parameters of “Greater Eurasia” are very different from those of “Eurasia”, the ideological logic of the discourse is similar. Like “Eurasia” or “Russia-Eurasia”, “greater Eurasia” is a naturally cohesive region, and the different countries and regions that are part of it form a natural community. Most fundamentally, this provides the rationale for Russia's much-publicized “turn to Asia,” above all the development of an intense rapprochement between Russia and China, which over the last half-decade or so has become the most significant aspect of Russian foreign policy overall. Strikingly, and rather perversely, it is precisely the success of its “Eurasianist” alliance with China that provides Russia with a degree of economic stability and political support that enabled it to declare war on a Europeanizing Ukraine and, by extension, on Europe itself.

6. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community



WORKSHOPS AND PAPERS PRESENTED

Workshops organized by the Project:

"The Vision of Eurasia," Södertörn University (June 2014; 9 Participants)

"The Eurasian Union: Last Chance for Russian hegemony?" Kings College London (May 2015; 11 Participants)

"The Politics of Eurasianism" Södertörn University (July 2014; 21 Participants)

Public Seminars, held at Utrikspolitiska Institutet, Stockholm

"Continental Vision: Russia's Interests," panel of 3 presentations (April 2019)

"Continental Vision: Eurasia according to China," panel of 3 presentations (Nov 2019)

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS (Note: Entries marked with (*) are *Open Access* publications)

Monographs and Edited Volumes

Bassin, Mark, Marlene Laruelle, and Sergei Glebov, eds. 2015. *Between Europe and Asia: The Origins, Theories, and Legacies of Russian Eurasianism*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Bassin, Mark and Mikhail Suslov, eds. 2016. *Eurasia.2: Russian Geopolitics in the Age of New Media*. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Bassin, Mark. 2016. *The Gumilev Mystique: Biopolitics, Eurasianism and the Construction of Community in Modern Russia*, Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.

Awarded "Reginald Zelnick Book Prize" in History (Honorable Mention), Association for Slavic, Eurasian and East European Studies, 2017.

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Torbakov, Igor. 2018. *After Empire : Nationalist Imagination and Symbolic Politics in Russia and Eurasia in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*. Stuttgart : Ibidem-Verlag

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*Laruelle, Marlene, 2016, "The Izborky Club, or the New Conservative Avant-Garde in Russia," *The Russian Review* 75, no. 4: 626-644.



*Kotkina, Irina and Mikhail Suslov, 2015, "Ortho-blogging from inside," *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* 15 (re-published in Mikhail Suslov, ed, 2016, *Digital Orthodoxy in the Post-Soviet World. The Russian Orthodox Church and the Web 2.0*, Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag: 285-299.) <https://www.digitalicons.org/issue14/ortho-blogging-from-inside-a-virtual-roundtable/>

*Kotkina, Irina, 2016, "We Will ROC You! 'Tannhäuser' Opera Scandal and the Freedom of Artistic Expression in Putin's Russia," *Transcultural Studies* 12, no. 1: 66 – 91
<https://brill.com/view/journals/ts/12/1/ts.12.issue-1.xml?language=en>

*Kotkina, Irina, 2016, "Utopian Literature and Utopian Political Thinking in Present-Day Russia," in *The Russian Review*, 75, no. 4: 559–561 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/russ.12101>

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Book Chapters

Bassin, Mark, 2013, "Russia and Asia," in Nicholas Rzhevsky, ed, *Cambridge Companion to Russian Culture*, 2nd ed, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 565-93.

Bassin, Mark, 2014, "Etnicitet och Ekologi: Lev Gumiljov och det poststalinistiska sovjetiska 1960-talet," in Anders Burman and Lena Lennerhed, eds, *Tillsammans. Politik, filosofi och estetik på 1960- och 1970-talen*, Stockholm: Bokförlaget Atlas: 105-132.

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Bassin, Mark, 2017, "'What is more important: blood or soil?': Rasologija contra Eurasianism," in Mark Bassin and Gonzalo Pozo, eds, *The Politics of Eurasianism: Identity, Popular Culture and Russia's Foreign Policy*, London: Rowman and Littlefield: 39-58.

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*Bassin, Mark, 2016, "The Enigma of Eurasianism," *Baltic Rim Economies* 4: 48-49.

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*Torbakov, Igor, 2014, "Russia: Pondering Putin's Policy Contradiction," *EurasiaNet*, September 16, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/70006>

*Torbakov, Igor, 2014, "History, Myth, and the Struggle over Crimea," *EurasiaNet*, March 14, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68145>

*Torbakov, Igor, 2015, "The Russia-Turkey Spat: The Big Picture," *EurasiaNet*, December 15, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/76566>

*Torbakov, Igor, 2015, "Russia and the EU: The Tale of Two Empires," *EurasiaNet*, November 10, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/76031>

*Torbakov, Igor, 2016, "Russia: Raising a Red Flag about Imperial Overreach," *EurasiaNet*, February 8, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/77231>