



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Regnr Östersjöstiftelsen: 2017-0039

Project manager: Mark Bassin

Project title: Continentalism and Geopolitics: The Idea of 'Big- Space' Political Formations in Comparative Historical Perspective

1. Purpose of the project

This project was an examination the history and current relevance of continentalist ideas and their influence in national and international policymaking. For centuries, the “default” political form of the nation-state has been challenged by the idea of a supra-national, large-scale political entity. Continentalism is one category of big space thinking, based on a geographical teleology of political unification within the borders of a “continent”. In some cases, this teleology underlies a comprehensive geopolitical ideology of continentalism, which historically has drawn on the "big space" theories of F.Ratzel, C.Schmitt and H.Mackinder. Continentalism is used by political elites in order to consolidate a geopolitical identity and policy, larger than the national one, to influence processes of state formation and international integration. Continentalism can be associated both with hegemonic- authoritarian tendencies as well as democratic projects, and can inspire imperial expansionism as well as anti-colonial liberation movements. The project involved four case studies, which compare ideological iterations of continentalism in Europe, Russia-Eurasia, South America, and Africa. It was designed as a study in the history of political ideas, and drew on critical geopolitics as a methodological framework. This approach helped us to understand discursive fluidity the diversity of expressions that can be found in different forms of constructing ‘continentalist’ geographical visions.

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

A fundamental concern shared across all four sub-projects was the juxtaposition between political consolidation at two geographical scales: nation-state and continent. In particular, we were interested in the dynamics between these two levels as alternative visionary ‘platforms’ for the mobilization of social and political identities: continentalist and nationalist. Somewhat to our surprise, our research established that these dynamics tended in two different directions. On the one hand, we anticipated--and discovered--that there would be a clear tension between the two levels as competitors for political and social identification and commitment. Along with this, however, we were struck by an unanticipated alternative dynamic of a positive connection between the two, a resonance and even symbiosis between nationalism and continentalism in which one complimented and enhanced the other.

A clear example of these dual dynamics is apparent in our study of the history of continentalist sentiments in the European far right (EFR) since 1945. From the outset, the EFR sought to distance itself from the discredited hyper-nationalism of fascist Europe, and promoted instead the notion of a continent-wide European identity, based on geopolitical vision of Europe as an integrated and naturally cohesive geographical entity. The old nation-states had fostered only mutual hostility and destruction, and the old national



attachments needed to be superseded within a civic spirit of continental unity and solidarity. Already in the late 1940s, an early EFR statement declared that the “the nation is dead, for Europe is born,” a sentiment which was repeated in 1980s in a manifesto that declared that “the stupid and dangerous theory of nationalities ... should give way to the principle of supranationalism”. Continental unity clearly came only at the expense of national consolidation.

More recently, however, the EFR's vision of Europe has shifted from geopolitics to an emphasis on the cultural-historical and civilizational unity of European society. Among other things, this has the effect of removing the assumption of a necessary zero-sum conflict between the two geographical levels. Very much to the contrary, today the supranational impulse cohabits peacefully with the traditional nationalist prioritization of the nation as a unique social community and political entity. This cohabitation, moreover, does not depend on the two somehow being kept separated in discrete affectional boxes in order to reduce the ideological tension that the obvious differences between them might logically be expected to generate. To the contrary, they are actively conflated and combined in radical right ideologies, and this combination generates a synergy that is constructive and positive. Precisely same tendency can be observed in contemporary continentalist discourses in South America and Africa.

A very different result of our project relates to the enduring significance of the epistemologies of “classical geopolitics” for the evolution of continentalist thinking throughout the Cold War and right down to the present day. This was true for the far right in Europe, but also for more mainstream tendencies in Russia and South America. From the late 1890s down to 1945, a collection of European and American scholars, statesmen, and military strategists developed a large body of ideas, theories and concepts that tried to shape political practice with radically new conceptualizations of global geographical space. Collectively, this legacy is referred to as classical geopolitics. Our research demonstrated how this rich analytical legacy—based around leading concepts such as of “heartland,” “rimland,” “world-island,” “pan-region,” “land vs sea power,” “Lebensraum,” “Grossraum” and “Ergänzungsraum”—continues to provide fundamental inspiration for continentalist imaginaries on all four of the continents that we examined.

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

One of the original inspirations for this project was Lewis and Wigan's 1997 book *The Myth of Continents*, which argued that geographical continents, which are assumed to be part of the natural-geographical environment and therefore exist “objectively,” are in fact subjective and discursive entities, that are imagined and “constructed” by particular individuals and societies for particular reasons. The research of our project not only confirmed this basic point but really went much further in unpacking how continents are not merely constructions but more protean “meta-constructions”: imaginaries that are remarkably flexible and even malleable as they are projected on regions and societies. Indeed, it became apparent for all of the sub-projects that each was dealing not with a single continentalism but rather with multiple continentalisms, all claiming to represent the same macro-region but projecting it in very different ways.

Thus, the continental imaginary of South America co-exists with a closely related but different projection of Latin America, while the name America can also be used to refer to the combined territory of the Western hemisphere (i.e. North + Central + South America) as itself a single continent. In the case of Eurasia, there are at least two different



continentalist projects. One is called Eurasianism, which dates back to the early 20th century and (roughly) defines Eurasia as the territories of the former Soviet Union. This particular version of Eurasia is the basis for the organization of the Eurasian Economic Union, which was created in 2015. More recently, an alternative continental vision of “Greater Eurasia” has been elaborated and given great significance by the Putin regime, which suggests that many regions of the Asia Pacific—above all China—belong together with Russia-Eurasia as a natural geographical-geopolitical block. Finally, the concept of Europe as a geographical continent is notoriously imprecise and variable, a variability that was conspicuously apparent even in our project’s very limited focus on the EFR during the Cold War. For some, continental Europe extended southward across the Mediterranean to include parts of Africa. Many others, by contrast, argued vociferously for the inclusion of the Eurasian spaces of the USSR as part of a “greater Europe”

4. New research questions that the project has led to

In the original conceptualization—and in the original title—of this project, “continentalism” was treated effectively as synonymous with “big-space thinking.” Our research has however led us to appreciate that these two concepts are not in fact synonymous, and that the relationship between them is complicated and needs to be problematized with new research questions. Big-space thinking refers to imaginaries of political macro-units that are supranational and significantly exceed the geographical dimensions of ordinary nation-states. Continentalism conceives of such macro-units on the basis of geographical criteria, namely continental landmasses. What we came to appreciate in our research was that there are other, non-geographical categories of criteria that can serve as the basis of big-space thinking. One example of particular importance today is “civilizationism,” which envisions an entity that gathers together various peoples and lands based on shared cultural and/or religious values and common historical destiny, seeing itself as a *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* or “community of destiny.” An alternative expression of big-space thinking are the so-called pan-movements, for example pan-Slavism, pan-Germanism, pan-Turkism, or pan-Arabism, which conceive macro-states that are based on ethnic or in some cases even racial criteria. Finally, it may be said that the original form of big-space thinking, the German notion of *Grossraum*, was based not so much on geographical factors as on the logic of economic planning, rational resource use, demographic planning and economies of scale.

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

Our research consisted of four sub-projects covering four continental case studies, so in a sense the insights that we produced are global. However, two of our case studies—Europe and Eurasia—relate specifically to Eastern Europe and the Baltic Sea region, and both provide critical insight, among other things, into the current crisis in Ukraine. On one level, the current conflict in Ukraine can be seen as a product of the overlapping and competing continentalist imaginaries that we examined in this project. On the one hand, the Putin regime has over many years sought to reassemble the various states of the former Soviet Union into a united entity. Discursively, this geopolitical project is based on a continentalist strategy, namely the identification of this entire space as Eurasia and the argument that this geographical commonality should be the basis for its political unity in the form of Eurasian Economic Union. The Putin regime identified Ukraine, despite its being a sovereign state since 1991, as an integral part of continental Eurasian space, and pressured the Ukrainian leadership strongly to be part of the corresponding political



consolidation. Ukraine's refusal to join the Russian project and embrace a continental Eurasian identity led directly to the first Russian incursion in 2014, including the annexation of Crimea.

Western Europe and the USA have taken a diametrically contrasting position that paradoxically follows the same continentalist strategy, arguing in this case for Ukrainian identity not as Eurasia but rather as a natural part of European space. In fact, the “Europeanness” of Ukraine has been only unevenly embraced by the West, and certainly throughout the Cold War the region was either recognized as Soviet space, or at least as a “torn country” (in Samuel Huntington’s expression), part of which was Soviet-Russian and part of which was European. However, the Russian invasion of 2022 has served to re-galvanize continentalist discourse in Europe, in order to establish an imaginary in which Ukraine in its entirety was a fully natural and legitimate part of European space.

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

Note: Open Access materials are marked with (*)

Monographs:

Suslov, Mikhail. *Geopolitical Imagination: Ideology and Utopia in Post-Soviet Russia*. With a Foreword by Mark Bassin. Stuttgart: Ibidem (2020).

Edited volumes:

Döring, Katharina P.W, Ulf Engel, Linnéa Gelot and Jens Herpolsheimer (eds.). *Researching the Inner Life of the African Peace and Security Architecture*. Leiden: Brill (2021).

Döring, Katharina P.W, Ulf Engel, Linnéa Gelot and Jens Herpolsheimer (eds.). *Recherche sur la vie interne de l'Architecture africaine de paix et de sécurité: l'AAPS vue à l'envers*. Leiden: Brill (in press)

Rivarola Putigliano, Andres and José Briceño Ruiz (eds). *Regionalism in Latin America: Agents, Systems and Resilience*. London: Routledge (2020).

Suslov, Mikhail and Dmitry Uzlaner (eds.), *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes and Dangers*. Leiden: Brill (2019)

Books Under Contract or Review

Döring, Katharina P.W. *Making Room for War. African Military Politics in the Sahel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Under review, African Studies Series



Suslov, Mikhail. *Ideological Mainstream of Putinism: Concepts, Discourses and Metaphors in the Service of Regime Legitimation*. London: Routledge.

Suslov, Mikhail, Vladimir Dordevic, and Marek Cejka (eds.), *Slavophilia: Manifestations of Pan-Slavism in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan

Peer-Reviewed Journal articles

Bassin, Mark. "Everything is Revealed in Maps": The European Far Right and the Legacy of Classical Geopolitics during the Cold War," *Geopolitics* (accepted for publication, 2022)

Bassin, Mark. "Eurosiberia: Fascist and Neo-Fascist Imaginaries of Euro-Asian Space." Under review with *Nationalities Papers*

* Rivarola Putigliano, Andres. "Geopolitics and regionalism: A Latin American perspective." *Latin American Policy* (2019), 1– 15.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/lamp.12224>

* Rivarola Putigliano, Andrés. "The Geopolitics of the Catholic Church in Latin America", *Territory, Politics, Governance* 9, no. 3 (2021): 455-470.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/21622671.2019.1687326>

* Suslov, Mikhail. "The "Russian World" Concept: 'Spheres of influence' in the post-Soviet geopolitical ideology," *Geopolitics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 330-353.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14650045.2017.1407921>

Suslov, Mikhail. 'Geopolitization of the Post-Soviet Diaspora in the Baltic Sea Region,' *Global Affairs* 4, no. 4-5 (2018): 521-535.

Book Chapters

Bassin, Mark. "Foreword." In Mikhail Suslov, *Geopolitical Imagination: Ideology and Utopia in Post-Soviet Russia*. Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2020.

Bassin, Mark. "Geopolitics or ethnopoltics? Guillaume Faye, the European far right, and the 'Russia problem'". In *Contemporary Far-Right Thinkers and the Future of Liberal Democracy* (pp. 103-120). London: Routledge, 2021

Bassin, Mark and Ian Klinke. "Ratzel in Nordamerika: Umwelt, Raum und Rasse." In *Denken im Raum. Friedrich Ratzel als Schlüsselfigur geopolitischer Theorienbildung* (pp. 23-58). Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2021.

Bassin, Mark. "Foreword." In Thomas Lundén and Ragnar Björk (Eds.), *Territory, state and nation: The geopolitics of Rudolf Kjellén*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2021

Döring, Katharina P.W. and Ulf Engel. "Chapter 10. Trade and Regional Integration". In Engel, Ulf (eds.) *Yearbook on the African Union 2020*. Leiden: Brill (2021).



Döring, Katharina P.W. and Jens Herpolsheimer. „Introduction. Researching the Inner Life of the African Peace and Security Architecture”. In Döring, KPW et al. (eds.) *Researching the Inner Life of the African Peace and Security Architecture*. APSA Inside-Out. Leiden: Brill (2021).

Döring, Katharina P.W. and Jens Herpolsheimer. „Researching APSA Through a Spatial Lens”. In Döring et al. (eds.) *Researching the Inner Life of the African Peace and Security Architecture*. Leiden: Brill (2021).

Döring, Katharina P.W. and Jens Herpolsheimer. „Introduction. Recherche sur la vie interne de l'Architecture africaine de paix et de sécurité”. In Döring, KPW et al. (eds.) *Recherche sur la vie interne de l'Architecture africaine de paix et de sécurité: l'AAPS vue à l'envers*. Leiden: Brill (forthcoming).

Döring, Katharina P.W. and Jens Herpolsheimer. „Chapitre 6. Analyse spatiale de l'APSA”. In Döring, KPW et al. (eds.) *Recherche sur la vie interne de l'Architecture africaine de paix et de sécurité: l'AAPS vue à l'envers*. Leiden: Brill (forthcoming).

Döring, Katharina P.W. and Jens Herpolsheimer. „Understanding Complex, Collective Actors at African Regional Organizations”. In Steffi Marung and Ursula Rao (eds.) *Practices and Processes of Space-Making Under the Global Condition*. München: De Gruyter Oldenbourg (forthcoming).

Rivarola Puntigliano, Andres, “The Military and Latin American integration.” In Andres Rivarola Putigliano and José Briceño Ruiz, eds. *Regionalism in Latin America: Agents, Systems and Resilience* (London: Routledge, 2020).

Rivarola Puntigliano, Andres and José Briceño Ruiz, “Introduction: Regionalism in Latin America: Resilience, systems and agents.” In Andres Rivarola Putigliano and José Briceño Ruiz, eds. *Regionalism in Latin America: Agents, Systems and Resilience* (London: Routledge, 2020).

Rivarola Puntigliano, Andres and José Briceño Ruiz, “Resilience and acquis in Latin American regionalism”. In Andres Rivarola Putigliano and José Briceño Ruiz, eds. *Regionalism in Latin America: Agents, Systems and Resilience* (London: Routledge, 2020).

Rivarola Puntigliano, Andres “Kjellén's intellectual impact in Latin America.” In Thomas Lundén and Ragnar Björk (Eds.), *Territory, state and nation: The geopolitics of Rudolf Kjellén*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2021

Rivarola Puntigliano, Andres. “El continentalismo Latinoamericano: nacionalismo de quinta frontera”, In Alberto Methol Ferré: *Reflexiones sobre geopolítica y la region*, [ed] Gerardo Caetano, Diego Hernández Nilson, Montevideo, Uruguay: Planeta de Libros, 2019, p. 45-66.

Rivarola Puntigliano, Andrés and Gianfranco Selgas, ‘Geopolitics, Environment and the Reimagination of Development’. In Benedicte Bull and Mariel Aguilar-Støen (eds), *International Handbook of Development and the Environment*, Edward Elgar, 2022



Suslov, Mikhail and Irina Kotkina, 'Civilizational Discourses in Doctoral Dissertations in Post-Soviet Russia,' in Sanna Turoma and Kåre Johan Mjør (eds.), *Civilizational Discourses in Post-Soviet Russia* (London: Routledge, 2020): 164-185.

Suslov, Mikhail. 'Russian Conservatism as an Ideology: The Logic of Isolationism,' in Suslov and Uzlaner (eds.), *Contemporary Russian Conservatism*, pp. 77-102.

Suslov, Mikhail. "Bigger Is Better: Continent Eurasia in Russian Geopolitical Imagination", Christine Engel, and Birgit Menzel (eds.), *Russland und/als Eurasien : Kulturelle Konfigurationen* (Berlin: Frank&Timme, 2018), 19-43