Politics. Rivista di Studi Politici
www.rivistapolitics.it
n. 13, 1/2020, 129-148

ISSN 2279-7629

National Identity and the Perception of Geographical Space in Contemporary Russian Political Thought

Paolo Pizzolo - **Emmanuele Quarta**

Abstract

This paper investigates the evolution of the concept of Russian identity in relation to the geographical and cultural features of Russian political thought. It observes the liaison between Russian national identity and the concept of Russian-Eurasian space. Despite the regime changes of the last century, it is argued, Russia has often perceived itself as a unique political entity whose identity and mindset is closely intertwined with its large spaces. The paper examines the main features of Russian political theory from the nineteenth century to nowadays. In a first part, we focus on the Slavophiles-Westernizers debate and classical Eurasianist doctrine. Then, we discuss the concept of space in Soviet times, confronting the official discourse with Nikolai Berdayev's and Lev Gumilyov's theoretical paradigm. Finally, we analyse the development of neo-Eurasianist thought in post-Soviet Russia, focusing specifically on Aleksandr Panarin's and Aleksandr Dugin's works.

Keywords

Russian Political Thought - Russian Nationalism - Eurasianism - Russian Idea - Neo-Eurasianism

Introduction

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, the issue of Russian national identity has made its return in the country's political, social, and cultural debate. Almost three decades from the day the Red Flag was replaced by the Russian tricolour, the answer to this question – "what does it mean to be Russian?" – is still unclear. To be sure, attempts have been made at formulating a new national idea upon the ashes of the Soviet bloc, much of which came from circles of former Soviet dissident intellectuals who often drew from the Russian philosophical tradition. This said, it should be noted that Russian philosophy can be entirely collocated in the context of the Western intellectual tradition, and one can hardly deny the centrality of the relationship between Russia and the West within the debate on Russian identity (Tolz 2001, 69). 'Russia' and 'the West', however, should not be understood in a

purely geographical meaning. Instead, «they appear [...] to be ciphers or code words which signal a more fundamental philosophical question about the universality of reason» (Groys 1992, 185). Many of the issues that this philosophy deals with, either referred to social ethics and political theory, to the relationship between individual and state, to epistemology, or to political, religious and aesthetic values, epitomize its ongoing relevance with the Western tradition of thought owned by Plato. When considering the philosophical character of thinking, Russian thinkers – either Marxist, non-Marxist, or anti-Marxist – exhibit a clear and unambiguous belonging to Plato's theoretical tradition. Even Slavophilism and Eurasianism, which claim to be 'anti-Western' doctrines, stem in fact from the Western philosophical paradigm and mindset. To a large extent, the philosophy of the Soviet epoch represents the final stage of the improvement and incarnation of Plato's ideas in Western civilization. During this stage, the project of ideocracy came to a complete realization and exhausted itself. In this sense, Russian philosophy both condenses and epitomizes more than two thousand years of the Platonic tradition.

However, notwithstanding the thrust towards materialistic and empirical-oriented ideocracy during the Soviet period, Russian philosophical thought displays a natural inclination towards abstractness, introspection, metaphysics, and spirituality. Unlike Anglo-Saxon pragmatism, which relies above all on utilitarian and empirical principles, Russian thought focalizes on supernatural and transcendent conceptions, which harmonize with the mysticism and solemnity of the Orthodox Church. Throughout the entire historical experience of the Russian state, philosophical doctrines pivoted on two fundamental pillars: the interpretation of Russia's national identity and the connection between identity and geographical space. Indeed, Russian identity "suffered" the consequences of the overextension of Russia's territory. The geographical factor obliged Russia to reconsider its identity over and over again. The coexistence inside the same polity – the Russian Empire first and the Soviet Union later – of hundreds of different ethnicities and peoples obliged to shape a flexible concept of being "Russian". This paper will try to describe the evolution of the perception of Russian identity in relation to the country's geographical vastness, which historically represented both its blessing and its curse.

Between the East and the West: The perception of Russian identity from the Slavophiles-Westernizers debate to the early Eurasianist theories

A modernist account of the history of nationalism locates the origins of this phenomenon in the forty years between «the Partitions of Poland and the American Revolution through the French Revolution to the reaction to Napoleon's conquests in Prussia, Russia and Spain» (Smith 2010, 95). Throughout these decades, in Western Europe the idea of nation came to challenge the common European sentiment that had characterised the first half of the eighteenth century. One, however, does not

necessarily have to subscribe to the modernist school of thought on nationalism to recognize the tie that binds the Age of Enlightenment – with its twofold legacy of universalism and republicanism – and the origins of nationalist doctrines as a reaction to its universalistic assumptions (Birch 1989, 13, quoted in Anbarani 2013, 63). An accurate account of the theses of key-figures such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775-1854), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) would exceed the scope of this article. It suffices, in this respect, to highlight that these ideas circulated widely among the educated Russian society (Groys 1992, 186).

The Europeanization policy launched under the reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725) marked a watershed in the history of the country as, in the early eighteenth century, Russia moved from being perceived as an Asian state to being considered part of the European family (Mikkeli 1998, 161). While the most tangible sign of this process was perhaps the construction of the new capital, Saint-Petersburg, the proclamation of Russia as an empire instead of a tsardom brought the country closer to its European counterparts, with a European metropolis and a vast colonial domain east of the Urals (Bassin 1991, 5-6). By virtue of this geographical dichotomy, it is not surprising that much of the historical discourse on Russian national identity lays its roots in the nineteenth-century debate opposing Slavophiles (*slavyanophily*) and Westernizers (*zapadniki*) around the interpretation of the Petrine inheritance and the relationship between Russia and Western Europe. Let us briefly recall their respective views on the subject in a simplified fashion. Against the principles of rationalism and enlightenment Peter the Great introduced in Russia as well as the doctrine of official nationality (Neumann 1996, 32), Slavophiles opposed the values of the harmonious integration of – and solidarity between – individuals based on the concept of *sobornost'*. Under the spell of nineteenth century romanticism, they called for a return to Russia's native principles and, upon the basis of the superiority of Orthodox religion, bestowed on Russia the messianic task of redeeming a morally decaying Europe. Westernizers, on the other hand, held a firm belief in the European roots of Russia and in its belonging to the family of European nations. Instead of a sign of their country's uniqueness, they considered its political, social, and economic backwardness the outcome of a complex historical evolution that should be addressed.

What appears relevant for the purpose of this article is the centrality of the geographical – or, perhaps more properly, 'geocultural' – element. In other words, the answer to what Russia was (or was supposed to be) was profoundly intertwined with the country's relationship with the West, its national and cultural 'sense of place' vis-à-vis Europe, so much so «that post eighteenth-century Russian nationalism is unthinkable apart from the ambivalent relationship between Russia and the West»

(Stein 1976, 405). As such, the Slavophiles-Westernizers dispute would exert a major influence on the following generations of Russian intellectuals interested in national issues. Russian historian Sergey Mikhailovich Solovyov (1820-1879) is a clear example of the intellectual fertility of the debate opposing *slavyanophily* and *zapadniki*. Fascinated in his youth by the ideals of the Slavophiles, Solovyov would subsequently adhere to the theses of the nationalist wing of the Westernizers (Bassin 1993, 489-490). As such, a consistent share of his work was devoted to prove the European-*ness* of Russia, a task he partially undertook with the publication of *Istoriya Rossii s Drevneishikh Vremen* ("History of Russia from the Earliest Times")[1], in which his work of historical reconstruction is imbued with geographical reasoning.

As noted by Bassin (1993, 490), the Montesquieuean idea that «the physical size of a state had a direct effect on its political and social constitution» was quite popular at those times. In other words, such concept brought forward the strict connection between the physical extension of a state and its form of government – be it republican, monarchical, or autocratic – so that large empires, by virtue of the sheer size of their territory, implied a despotic authority at their head, whereas smaller states were more apt to either republican or monarchical rule. As a Westernizer – and given the vastness (*gromandost'*) of the Russian Empire which, he noted, would lead some «to think that Russia is a huge state like ancient Assyria, Persia, or the Roman Empire» – Solovyov sought to contrast such idea by proposing a distinction between 'inorganic' and 'organic' states (Bassin 1993, 491). In his view, inorganic states – among which he included the Roman Empire – are states whose growth from small polities occurred in a relatively short time and by means of military expansion at the expenses of other states. The lack of natural cohesion between the parts of the whole – as well as the absence of internal movement – brings about their eventual disintegration, so much so that they collapse as quickly as they have grown. The growth of organic states, on the other hand, does not occur through military expansion; it is, instead, the product of the geographical milieu in which these polities originated. In other words, organic states were those polities that *naturally* reached their size in harmony with the physical geography of their environment. European states were, to his eyes, clear examples of organic state entities. In the case of Russia, Solovyov argued, the huge dimensions of the state were 'stipulated by nature', that is, by the vast Eastern European flatlands – as well as the rivers flowing from it, which contributed to the progressive integration of the tribes scattered across this 'vast but empty land' – in which the Russian state laid its roots. Thus, he came to conclude that «Russia was

[1] "History of Russia", composed of 29 volumes, was first published in St. Petersburg between 1851 and 1879, the year Solovyov passed away.

politically as well as ethnographically the product of its immediate physiographic context» (Bassin 1993, 493).

After having demonstrated the organic nature of the Russian state, Solovyov would set about explaining the reasons why the historical development of Russia starkly differed from that of other European countries[2]. In his historical reconstruction of the process leading to the formation of the Russian state, cultural and political geography merge with – or overlap – physical geography. Simply put, from Solovyov's standpoint, space – hereby intended in its physical sense – plays a key role in the political and cultural development of states. Such idea closely recalls the geographical determinism underlying traditional geopolitics, which is hardly surprising since Solovyov had been a student of German geographer Carl Ritter (1779-1859), whose works – along those of Johan Rudolf Kjellén (1864-1922) and Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904) – would lay the intellectual basis for the German school of *Geopolitik*, as well as exert a major influence on the intellectual development of Eurasianist theories.

As a philosophical current, early Eurasianism was originally conceived in the 1920s by intellectual *émigrés* who had fled Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution and the outbreak of the Civil War. The first Eurasianist collection of articles was published in Bulgaria in 1921 under the name *Iskhod k Vostoku* ("Exodus to the East"), which was conceived as a manifesto for the beginning of a new era of thought that could reshape the nature of Russian identity. Somewhat influenced by the Slavophile movement, Eurasianism opposed Russian westernization and promoted Russia's specific cultural identity vis-à-vis Europe and the West (Bassin 1991, 14). Unlike Slavophiles, however, Eurasianists did not consider the Slavic identity as the main feature to understand Russia's cultural uniqueness, which would represent instead a combination of the Slavic and the Turanian components[3]; in this sense, the Turanian peoples were considered closer to Russian culture compared with the cultures of western Slavs. According to Trubetskoy, Eurasian history was the result of a composition between the Russian-Slavic element and the Turanian-Mongolic: the cohabitation and common historical destiny between Slavs and Turanians represented the pivot component of Russian history (Bassin 1991, 15; Trubetskoy 1993, 59).

Accordingly, Eurasianists rejected pan-Slavism and the creation of a pan-Slavic country, while supporting the creation of a Eurasian empire with different nations and ethnic groups sharing a common civilizational model – including East Slavs, Caucasians, Mongols, Finno-Ugric and Turkic peoples. At the same time, Orientalism produced an

[2] For a detailed analysis of this aspect, see Bassin 1993, 495-510.

[3] The word Turanism comes from the word 'Turan', a historical region in Central Asia. Turanism, or pan-Turanism, represents a nineteenth century ideology produced by some Turkish, Hungarian, German and Ottoman philosophers to promote the union, cooperation and 'renaissance' of all Turanian peoples, including the Finns, Japanese, Koreans, Turks, Mongols, Manchus, Sami, Samoyeds, Hungarians, and so on.

influence on Eurasianism, sharing common epistemological traits and a similar analytical normativity.

Strongly influenced by Russia's 'otherness' in relation to the West, Eurasianists shared with Slavophiles the idea that Russian culture should be preserved against Westernization and modern liberalism. They asserted the values of traditionalism, celebrated the greatness of the Russian imperial experience and assumed that embracing Western models could lead Russian society to a fast decline (Dugin 2014, 19-20). Russia was perceived as neither European nor Asiatic, but rather as a unique Eurasian polity, with its specific historical evolution and geopolitical constants (Dugin 2004, 17-18). As a spiritual, eschatological current, Eurasianism gave a mystical interpretation of the Russian Revolution, condemning Bolshevik materialistic progressivism and the atheist Marxist doctrine. In the end, Marxism represented the latest attempt of imposing a 'Western' doctrine in Russia after the period of forced Westernization of the Romanov era. On the other hand, Russia should find its soul as the continuer of the Roman-Byzantine empire thanks to the legacy of Moscow as Third Rome after the fall of Constantinople (1453), and as the heir to Genghis Khan's Mongol empire, from which the Khanate of the Golden Horde had emerged.

Though belonging to different political-ideological backgrounds, Eurasianists presented themselves as bearers of a 'third-way' ideology that rejected both communism and Western liberalism. Likewise, they showed skepticism towards fascism, monarchism or socialism, though often accepting some of their typical elements.

Among the movement's affiliates were geographers, linguists, philologists, historians, theologians, economists, ethnographers, and orientalists. Geographers, ethnographers, historians and anthropologists described the Eurasian big spaces, the geographical features, the ethnicities, and the history of the continent, while linguists, philologists, and Orientalists investigated and classified the nature and origin of Eurasian languages, and theologians explored the various Eurasian religions from Shamanism and Tengrism through to Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Significant advocates of early Eurasianism included Nikolai S. Trubetskoy (1890-1938), Pyotr N. Savitsky (1895-1965), Georges V. Florovsky (1893-1979), George V. Vernadsky (1877-1973), Nikolai N. Alekseyev (1879-1964), Ivan A. Ilyin (1883-1954), Dmitry P. Sviatopolk-Mirsky (1890-1939), and Ėrenzhen Khara-Davan (1883-1941).

The 1920s would be the years of full development of classic Eurasianist thought, when several publications, pamphlets and essays concerning Eurasian topics were issued in France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria by the leaders of the Eurasianist movement. By 1928, the Eurasianist movement split into two factions, one hostile to Soviet rule based in Prague and another closer to the Soviet regime in Paris.

During the 1930s, Eurasianism started to decline, marginalized by alternative ideologies like fascism or communism. The outbreak of the Second World War marked the end of early Eurasianism.

The perception of Russia's identity and the interpretation of Russian-Eurasian spaces present some unique characteristics in early Eurasianist thinkers and authors. First, Nikolai Trubetskoy conceived Russian identity as a fusion of the Eastern Slavic and the Turanian civilizations (Trubetskoy 1993, 62), recognizing some common features between the languages, cultures, and socio-political behaviour of Eurasian peoples. He also believed that the socio-historical features of the Turanian peoples led towards the foundation of ideocratic and autocratic regimes. As the natural heir of the Mongol Empire, Russia had inherited this inclination, which the forced "Westernization" of Russian society under the Romanov dynasty – specifically Peter I and Catherine II – had weakened. Moreover, Trubetskoy highlighted the relevance of the unity of the Eurasian supercontinent, resulting from a vertical relationship of each component to the whole (Trubetskoy 1923, 334). He also considered the borders between the Russian-Eurasian civilization and the Asian cultures as unremarkable since a geographical continuity characterized the vast lands of the Eurasian supercontinent (Trubetskoy 1927, 135). In Trubetksoy's theoretical paradigm, those historical epochs of Russian history dominated by the Turanian element, like the period of the Mongol domination (13th-16th centuries) were exalted, believing that unlike the Western Slavic nations, the Russian identity and conception of space was essentially Slavic-Turanian rather than simply Slavic. Eurasian history was the result of a fusion between the Russian-Slavic and the Turanian-Mongolic elements: the cohabitation and common sharing of historical destiny between Slavs and Turanians embodied the pivot component of Russian history (Trubetskoy 1993, 59). Trubetskoy also emphasized the importance of Genghis Khan's Mongol Empire, which offered Russia its hidden identity, a Eurasian common geographical distinctiveness, and a common rule over Eurasian lands (Pizzolo 2020, 60). Through the Mongol imperial ideocracy, Russia inherited its justification for empire-building, its perception of geographical space, and its geopolitical vocation as a tellurocratic power. In *Yevropa i Chelovechestvo* ("Europe and Humankind"), Trubetskoy denied the universality of the Western European model, denouncing European colonialism and its imperialistic socio-economic paradigm. The realization of Russia's Easterness was a logical consequence of the rejection of the Western liberal-democratic model (Trubetskoy 1920). Trubetskoy committed himself to rehabilitating the Turanic element of Russian history, refuting the Eurocentric historiographical vision of Russia's history as the result of the sole Kievan, Muscovite and Romanov eras.

Secondly, Pyotr Savitsky developed a specific conception of Russian identity linked to geographical space known as 'theory of topogenesis'[4]. Influenced by geographical determinism, this theory supposes the existence of a mystical link between territories and cultures. The geographical environment would represent the chief factor for the rise of civilizations, significantly influencing their cultural and historical developmental path. History and territory would be intertwined, and the historical evolution of peoples would rest on the characteristics of the land they inhabit, including climate, soil, orography, flora, fauna, weather, waterways, and so on. Re-echoing Friedrich Ratzel's paradigm, Savitsky conceived geography as a living organism that interacts with the peoples that it hosts, determining their specific features. He also contributed to the development of the discipline known as geosophy, that is the branch of geography that studies landscape not only as an ordinary object related to natural sciences but as a valuable contribution to human history, culture, and national identity. According to the principles of geosophy, Savitsky believed that the Eurasian landmass justified its natural unification since Eurasia possessed a geometric and systemic nature from one area to another and this natural homogeneity implied its political unification. Eurasia could benefit from its 'natural borders', which extended from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific shores. This thesis opposed the conventional delimitation of the borders between Europe and Asia given by the Ural Mountains. In Savitsky's thought, the Eurasian steppes – which were conceived as the natural unifier of Eurasia – offered Russia many features of its specific identity: a continentalist-tellurocratic mindset, the idea of an extensive space to subjugate, the disposition towards economic autarky, a mentality projected towards political isolationism, and the geographical need to control – in Mackinder's words – the pivotal Heartland (Pizzolo 2020, 61). Russia-Eurasia represented a closed system that could not accept any form of separatism: due to its Eurasian connections, Russia possessed a natural justification to expanding towards Eastern Europe, Asia's Far East and the Pacific Ocean. Savitsky admired the Mongol period of Russian history, considering it as the founding moment of the expression of the uniqueness of Russian cultural identity. He also believed that under the rule of the Tatars, Russian spiritual life could shape its real identity and framework (Savitsky 1933). Since the time of the Mongol dominion, the Russian state gained legitimacy through religion and absorbed Mongolic principles of statehood, combining them with its own Byzantine theological and political traditions.

Finally, George Vernadsky introduced the substantial concept of 'noosphere', which represented the interaction between humanity and the biosphere. He believed that the biosphere was currently entering the new geological era of the noosphere, which was characterized by the power of human intellect. Emphasizing the Eurasian

[4] In Russian, the theory is known as '*Meztorazvitie'*.

historical evolution, Vernadsky claimed that the demise of the Turko-Mongol world after Tamerlane's death led to Russian leadership in the Eurasian continent. Likewise, he stated that geographical features had deeply influenced Russia's evolution since Russian history rested on its geography. Russian awareness of time followed the vastness of its territory, and thus the chronological epochs passed in a much slower way than elsewhere. In Russia-Eurasia – a self-existing universe with proper distances and units of measure – time and space were so profoundly interconnected that events took a longer time to unfold than in other continents (Pizzolo 2020, 63).

"Socialism in One Country"? Official and alternative visions of the Russian space in the twentieth century

The Russian revolution and the creation of the Soviet Union brought on a shift in the official conception of the Russian space. Along with the mythical freedom associated with the vastness of the Russian territory came the desire «to conquer and subdue» such space (Widdis 2004, 43). The expression itself of 'socialism in one country' – formulated by Iosif Stalin and Nikolai Bukharin in the 1920s – contains, in a way, the idea of borders (and control thereof). Drawing from the 1947 movie *Tale of the Siberian Land* and a 1935 map celebrating the project of the canal from the Baltic Sea to the White Sea, Widdis brilliantly illustrated this paradox – that is, the constant tension between freedom *in* and control *of* the territory – in Stalinist times, concluding that, just like Russianness, «the space itself becomes a symbol for the impossibility of self-definition» (Widdis 2004, 49).

At the same time, the Soviet government rejected the concept of 'nation', considering it an artificial category produced by industrial capitalism (Filler 2010, 97). And yet, against the all-encompassing project of the New Soviet Man, reflections upon the essence of Russianness were still very much alive in the Russian intellectual community, especially among the *émigrés* who either fled – or, by means of deportation on the 'philosophers' ships', were expelled of – the country in consequence of the Bolshevik revolution: as we have seen, such was the case of classic Eurasianism leading figures. The exiled Russian *intelligentsia* moved to the capitals of Western Europe, with the city of Paris turning into the political centre of this diaspora, «a new Mecca, a new Babylon» (Johnston 1988, 20). Arguably, one of the most influential figures of this exodus was the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948).

A Marxist in his youth, Berdyaev would progressively shy away from Marxism-Leninism and turn his attention towards Christian philosophy and spirituality. When the new regime expelled him from Russia in 1922, Berdyaev moved to Berlin and eventually reached Paris to become one of the most famous Russian *émigrés* intellectuals of his time. Aside from Christian existentialism, over the course of his life Berdyaev

developed an interest in the history of Russia as well as in Russian nationalism and the complex relationship between Russianness and Communism, the results of which were works such as "The Fate of Russia" (1918), "The Origin of Russian Communism" (1937), and "The Russian Idea" (1946). The latter might be considered Berdyaev's own attempt at investigating the meaning of Russianness.

To be sure, countless works have been devoted to the discovery of the Russian idea, «from Nestor the Chronicler, who in *Povest' Vremennykh Let* ["Primary Chronicle"] raised the question of "whence came the land of Rus?" all the way to Nikita Mikhalkov's "Manifesto of Enlightened Conservatism"» (Alekseev 2015, 12). Part of the peculiarity of Berdyaev's work lies in the complexity of his reasoning and writing, so much so that «nowhere in "The Russian Idea" can one find a distinct and complete summing up of what Berdyaev says about the main subject of his book – the Russian idea» (Poltoratzsky 1962, 123). Nevertheless, the theses contained in his works would live on to become the object of rediscovery in post-Soviet Russia (Boym 1995, 152).

In "The Origin of Russian Communism" and in "The Russian Idea", Berdyaev discusses the twofold nature of Russian communism: «on the one hand [the Russian revolution] is international and a world phenomenon; on the other hand, it is national and Russian» (Berdyaev 1948a, 7). Berdyaev holds a rather critical perspective on the 'New Soviet Man' project, since he sees Russian Communism as a «process of dehumanization» whose roots lie in the tradition of Russian anti-humanism, that is, in Russian state absolutism (Berdyaev 1948a, 183). In Berdyaev's writings resurfaces this idea of connection between, on the one hand, the vast expanse of the Russian territory and, on the other hand, the Russian national character. While, in the West, «everything is bounded, formulated, arranged in categories, everything (both the structure of the land and the structure of the spirit) is favourable to the organization and development of civilization», in Russia «people fell victim to the immensity of its territory» (Berdyaev 1948a, 9). Berdyaev establishes a connection between the Russian soul and «the immensity, the vagueness, the infinitude of the Russian land», so much so that Russia's «spiritual geography corresponds with physical» (Berdyaev 1948b, 2). «The inconsistency and complexity of the Russian soul», he explains, «may be due to the fact that in Russia two streams of world history, East and West, jostle and influence one another». In his view, Russia is neither a purely European nor a purely Asiatic country: it is, instead, «a complete section of the world, a colossal East-West. It unites two worlds, and within the Russian soul two principles are always engaged in strife – the Eastern and the Western» (Berdyaev 1948b, 2).

Nonetheless, discussions on Russianness were not limited to the circles of Russian intellectuals abroad. Following Stalin's death in 1953, for instance, the Russian debate on Europe was brought forward by foreign affair specialists (known as

mezhdunarodniki), although they mainly focused on the relations between Western countries themselves, as well as on the nature of the relationship Russia was to have with these countries (Neumann 1996, 131). Furthermore, despite the predominant Marxist-Leninist philosophical-political paradigm, in the Soviet era Russia witnessed a revival of Eurasianist thought due to the contributions of Lev Nikolayevich Gumilyov (1912-1992), who may be considered the intellectual connector between classic Eurasianism and neo-Eurasianism. His main contributions resulted in the theory of ethnogenesis, the theory of 'passionarity' (*passionarnost'*), the broadening of the theory of 'ethnic complementarity' between Slavic and Turkic peoples, and in the thorough analysis of proto-history and history of Eurasian nomadic empires founded by Turkic-Mongol peoples.

The theory of ethnicity defines 'ethnos' a general set of individuals or collectivity based on a common historical fate that represents a unique socio-biological organism, with a proper existing identity and uniqueness. Moreover, the 'ethnos' would not be just a biological element but also a physicochemical section of the planetary essence (Gumilyov 1989, 161). Ethnogenesis describes the appearance of an ethnos, that, once it emerges, goes through a series of fixed steps like the ages of a human being (Gumilyov 1992, 20). The concept of passionarity is closely linked to the idea of ethnogenesis. According to the theory of passionarity, each ethnos would be influenced by some energetic forces that would cause the so-called 'passionarity effect', which leads to the birth of individuals of a special temper and talent capable of forging empires and modifying the course of history. Moreover, ethnic complementarity highlighted how some ethnic groups that shared similar characteristics and mindset – like Slavic Russians and Turanians – could inhabit a common land and create a joint political community. An example of advantageous 'ethnic complementarity' was precisely that between Slavic Russians and Turanians.

Gumilyov considered the Eurasian supercontinent as a continuous steppe extending from the Yellow River to the Arctic Ocean (Gumilyov 1993, 77). This gigantic Eurasian landmass comprised the territory of the Soviet Union, Tibet, and Mongolia. According to Gumilyov, Eurasia implied a natural need for unification, Russia's eastward expansion represented a natural phenomenon, and Eurasian secessionism appeared as essentially unnatural (Gumilyov 1993, 65). He also believed in the existence of eight different super-ethnoi in Russia, which the country had managed to unify under its imperial rule[5]. Thus, the history of the Russian Empire epitomized the history of the convergence of the super-ethnoi of the Russians and of the steppic nomads in the Eurasian landscape. Like early Eurasianists, Gumilyov stated that the Russian Empire

[5] According to Gumilyov, Russia's eight super-ethnoi were the Russian, the steppic, the circumpolar, the Tatar-Muslim, the European, the Buddhist, the Byzantine (or Caucasian Christian), and the Jewish.

was the heir of Genghis Khan's polity. Russian history could not be understood without the framework of the connection between Russians and Tatars and the general history of the Eurasian continent. Finally, Gumilyov believed that Russia's historical ethnogenesis followed three fundamental stages: the epoch of Kievan Rus', the epoch of Tatar domination, and the epoch of the rise of Muscovy. The latter led to the Romanov rule (17th–19th centuries), which was guilty of betraying Russia's its Eurasian nature, opting for a 'Europeanisation' of its society. Indeed, Gumilyov's theories contributed in promoting the typical Soviet model of ethnic coexistence, underscoring the complementarity of the Russian and Turkic super-ethnoi, in contrast with cosmopolitan Western multiculturalism (Laruelle 2008, 78).

Post-Soviet Geographies of Russianness

After the demise of the Soviet Union, like many post-communist countries, Russia was confronted with the task of formulating a new national idea. This process went hand in hand with the transition towards market economy and a liberal-democratic form of government. The collapse of the Soviet Union had a major impact on Russian society: the citizens' emotions and feelings that followed this traumatic event reflected on their philosophical and social perceptions, as well as on the need to rediscover their own proper identity. The old beliefs that had been instilled in three generations of Soviet citizens had collapsed. The result of this was that Russian society in its entirety underwent a political and cultural crisis that did not spare politicians, ordinary people, and intellectuals, as «the crisis entailed the radical questioning of the validity of both Soviet and Russian traditional views of the world and the country's place in it» (Astrov and Morozova 2012, 196).

Mikhail Gorbachev's call for a "common European home" was to remain unanswered and Russia's crisis of identity would worsen through the course of the first post-Soviet decade. While the Russian political elite had not completely discarded the project of turning Russia into a «truly European» country, the outbreak of the war in the former Yugoslavia severely hindered the relations with their newfound Western partners (Morozov 2009, 318). At the same time, the economic and political crises that marked the transition to the newly born Russian state shed a negative light upon the idea of 'democracy' itself, with words such as '*dermokratiya*' (literally 'shitocracy') entering the common political jargon. It is not surprising, thus, that – even after the Soviet Union had disappeared – the West would remain «Russia's constituent other» (Tolz 2001, 72).

Much like it had happened in the aftermath of the political turmoil provoked by the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, one of the outcomes of the demise of the Soviet Union and its Marxist-Leninist theoretical paradigm was the resurfacing of Eurasianism, which

appeared under the new label of neo-Eurasianism, mainly thanks to the works of Aleksandr Panarin and Aleksandr Dugin. These two intellectuals, who belong by and large to the post-Soviet patriotic opposition, effectively concurred in providing a 'positive' content to the crisis the country had to endure following the demise of the Soviet Union. As Astrov and Morozova (2012, 212) remarked, in Dugin's writing the «[…] crisis is externalised in the form of a familiar threat, Atlantism». Though introducing new theoretical contributions, neo-Eurasianism still referred to the overall paradigm offered by classical Eurasianism. Characterized by a solid anti-Western and anti-Atlantist component and oriented towards an imperial renovation, neo-Eurasianism emerged as a theory of the multipolar world based upon the principles of cultural diversity, ethnic identity and multipolarity against the unilateral globalization model.

From a theoretical point of view, neo-Eurasianism formulates two main criticisms. The first is the 'rejection of the West', which implies an antagonism towards the neo-liberal capitalist and individualist model promoted by the West both from a social left-wing perspective and from an identitarian right-wing one. The second is the denial that the Anglo-Saxon civilization would possess the right to universally impose its paradigm, considering itself intrinsically superior to others through a form of 'democratic racism'. Admired historians of civilization like Nikolay Y. Danilevsky, Oswald Spengler and Arnold J. Toynbee contributed to shape the typically deterministic neo-Eurasianist approach to history, which implies close connections between geographical and anthropological-cultural features of peoples and a cause-effect relationship. Following the hermeneutical scheme of Nikolay V. Ustryalov's National-Bolshevik ideology and its development by Mikhail S. Agursky, Russian history is interpreted as a continuous process divided into several not disconnected stages.

At the same time, neo-Eurasianism blends traditionalism with esotericism, paying specific attention to the works of René Guénon, Julius Evola, Gaston Georgel, Titus Burckhardt, Georges Dumézil, Louis Dumont, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin. However, while bearing a conservative and traditionalist perspective, it also hinges on egalitarian and collectivist narratives, borrowing ideological features of both the far-right and the far-left and combining them to oppose the logics of Western post-liberalism, consumerism, hedonism, cultural imperialism, and unilinear globalism. Sympathizing with the elitist sociological tradition close to Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels, it develops a specific doctrine of the ontology of power based on the Byzantine/Christian Orthodox concept of *kat'echon* (Dugin 2014, 32), which Carl Schmitt understands as the intellectualization of the ancient *Imperium Christianum* fully entitled to enforce orthodox ethic (Schmitt 2003). Neo-Eurasianism assimilates from traditionalist philosophy the idea of the radical decay of the 'modern world', which would represent a negative antithesis of the utopian 'world of Tradition'.

The dialectic contraposition between modernism and traditionalism would be embodied by the geopolitical struggle between Atlanticism/thalassocracy and Eurasianism/tellurocracy. Occultism and esotericism play a special part too, specifically Madame Blavatsky's theosophy, the Tibetan myth of Shambala/Shangri-La, the legend of the 'King of the World', the myth of Agarthi, the chronicles of the Hyperboreans, and so on. It is no wonder that the 'Mad Baron' Roman von Ungern-Sternberg – an occultist, pan-monarchist and anti-Bolshevik Russian warlord – is considered a Eurasianist ideal model. Anthropological studies – precisely those carried out by Carl G. Jung and Claude Lévi-Strauss –, semiology, sacred geography, ethnography, and mythology, are likewise of utter interest for neo-Eurasianist doctrine. Moreover, neo-Eurasianism assimilates from the theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Carl Schmitt, Julien Freund, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, and Alain de Benoist the principle of organic or direct democracy – namely, '*demotia*' –, rejecting the idea of representative democracy (Dugin 2014, 33).

Finally, neo-Eurasianism – specifically Dugin's version – espouses classic geopolitical theories of the 20th century involving the Eurasian landmass. Neo-Eurasianists believe that Eurasia as a center of power projection is one of the most significant geopolitical concepts. Dugin's book *Osnovy Geopolitiki* ("The Foundations of Geopolitics"), which underscores the connection between the Eurasian continent and the sources of global power, is considered a major study of International Relations and represents the founding work of the Russian contemporary school of geopolitics (Laruelle 2008, 110). The chief geopoliticians that contributed to shape a neo-Eurasianist attitude towards geopolitical thinking have been Friedrich Ratzel, Rudolf Kjellén, Halford Mackinder, Alfred T. Mahan, Paul Vidal de La Blanche, Nicholas Spykman, Karl Haushofer, and Jean Thiriart. Both Aleksandr Panarin and Aleksandr Dugin theorize a specific view regarding Russian identity and the perception of its spaces. Panarin, who believed that geographical-historical attributes led Russia towards the adoption of an imperial regime, made thorough use of Nicholas Spykman's Rimland theory to describe the rivalry between tellurocratic and thalassocratic powers. As expression of tellurocratic power and as the Heartland-holder, Russia rivalled with thalassocratic Atlanticism, embodied by the United States and its NATO allies, for the control over the Rimland. Echoing the assumptions of classical Eurasianism, Panarin founded his neo-Eurasianist thought on the rejection of the Western model, which was accused of being responsible for all of Russia's suffering and illness[6]. In his attempt to oppose the neo-liberal and globalist Western paradigm, which he considered a form of «democratic

[6] Panarin made a distinction between 'Occidentalism' (*Zapadnichestvo*) and 'Westernization' (*Vesternizatsiya*). The former represented the typical elements of European philosophy, including liberalism, rule of law, democracy, legalism, and constitutionalism; the latter, which he vehemently condemned, represented ultra-capitalism, financialism, savage consumerism, and unilineal globalism.

racism» (Panarin 2002, 16), Panarin built a theoretical paradigm based on a civilizational model that would replace the logic of economics with cultural, traditional, and religious values (Panarin 1999, 19). He believed that all civilizations bore some unique features that could not be tracked back to the Western model and that their vanishing due to globalism would represent an impoverishment for all humankind. Western-led globalization was responsible for the destruction of ethnicities and civilizations, depriving them of their history, cultural model, social pluralism, and traditional views. Vehemently opposing Western cosmopolitanism, egalitarianism, and humanism, Panarin relied his hopes on the idea of state as fatherland capable of creating a civilizational area. This civilizational area, held together by an imperial idea, would represent a 'third way' between Western universalism and non-Western ethnic particularism. In Panarin's thought, the principle of civilization pluralism replaced that of cultural individualism. Moreover, Panarin supported Russian imperial idea: «If Russia becomes the Third Rome once again, post-industrial society will have better chances of becoming alternative to the industrial ghetto» (Panarin 1995, 72). He believed that empires were the only political system able to address the challenges of postmodern society, since they sponsored civilizational, ethnical, and historical awareness. In addition, the imperial system was conceived as the fittest to rule Russia-Eurasia, legitimizing its natural unification as a pan-continent and harmonizing its ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversities. Eurasia's ethnic diversities would enjoy a peaceful coexistence without paying the risk of extinction through the destruction of their identity, as in Western multicultural environments that – in the name of post-liberal individualism – promote the people's 'melting pot'.

On the other hand, Aleksandr Dugin interprets Russian-Eurasian identity and the idea of Eurasian space espousing the geopolitical thought of Carl Schmitt, Halford Mackinder, and Karl Haushofer (Dugin 2012; 2015; 2017). Carl Schmitt's philosophical-political paradigm is based on five fundamental pillars: the idea of Great Space (*Der Großraum*), the concept of Empire (*Das Reich*), the rights of peoples and nations above the rights of individuals, geopolitical sovereignty, and the struggle between thalassocracies and tellurocracies (*Das Meer gegen das Land*). All five concepts reappear in Dugin's neo-Eurasianist doctrine. Schmitt's idea of *Großraum* implies a political organization on a vast portion of land that produces a permanent bond between population and natural environment. Thus, *Großraum* represents a spiritual, eternal unit that forges the metaphysical-political 'Empire' (*Das Reich*) that hosts a folk linked together by a common mindset, system of values, and civilizational *Weltanschauung*. Dugin's idea of Eurasia coincides exactly with Schmitt's vision of 'Empire'. In his view, Russia should be the promoter of the creation of a Eurasian Empire bond together by a common traditionalist-conservative worldview. The first step for the creation of such empire would be Russia's reintegration of the post-Soviet

space. Secondly, Dugin assimilates completely Mackinder's theory of the world's pivotal region or Heartland (Mackinder 1904; 1919; 1943). As known, Mackinder stated that who controls eastern Europe would control the Heartland, in turn who controls the Heartland would control the World-Island (i.e. Eurasia), and finally who controls the World-Island would control the World. Therefore, Dugin relies on Mackinder's theory in order to explain Russia's geopolitical mission, which should be that of controlling the World-Island through the Heartland and at the same time averting Atlantist forces to keep a thorough control over the territories that lay on the Marginal Crescent or Rimland, that is the peripheral maritime or semi-maritime areas of the Eurasian continent. Finally, Dugin reintroduces Haushofer's geopolitical thought based on the two essential pillars of the pan-regions and the idea of the *Kontinentalblock* (Haushofer 1931; 1934). The idea of pan-regional system implied the creation of a new world based on several poles or large spaces with a great power dominating each bloc[7]. In his Eurasianist vision of global order, Dugin reorganizes the world in similar blocs, divided into civilizational zones and big spaces. Specifically, Dugin traces four geopolitical zones: the Atlantic meridian zone, the Euro-African meridian zone, the Russian-Central Asian meridian zone, and the Pacific meridian zone (Dugin 2014, 47). In turn, each geo-economic meridian zone includes some Great Spaces (Dugin 2014, 48)[8]. Dugin's division of the world into civilizational zones represents the basement upon which he advocates the advent of the future multipolar world. Finally, Dugin embraces Haushofer's *Kontinentalblock* project. Haushofer's original project consisted in creating a continental, pan-Eurasian alliance between Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and Imperial Japan through the Soviet inclusion in the Tripartite Pact. Dugin recollects the *Kontinentalblock* idea supporting a solid connection between Russia-Eurasia and Mitteleuropa-Germany in an anti-Atlantist and anti-thalassocratic fashion.

[7] Specifically, Haushofer envisioned the creation of four pan-regions: The American pan-region with the United States as dominant power, the Greater European pan-region, projecting its power on Africa, with Germany as hegemon, the Greater Eurasian pan-region, projecting its power in India and southern Asia, with the Soviet Union as hegemon, and the East-Asian pan-region with Japan as dominant power. The project was essentially conceived in an anti-British fashion.

[8] Specifically, the Euro-African zone would include Europe, the Arab Great Space, and Trans-Saharan Africa; the Russian-Central Asian zone would include the Russian-Eurasian Space, the Islamic Continental Space, and the Great Space of Hindustan; the Pacific zone would include the Chinese Great Space, the Japanese Great Space, and the Indo-Chinese Australasian Space; and the American zone would include the North American Space, the Central American Space, and the South American Space.

Conclusion

Starting from the late eighteenth century, the intellectual debate on Russian identity has been alternatively constructed along the lines of either proximity with – or opposition against – the West. This process came along with distinct perceptions of Russia's space, from both a physical and cultural point of view. Despite the breakup of the Soviet Union and the subsequent optimism about a potential rapprochement of Russia to Western liberal democracies, however, post-Soviet political elites did not manage to come up with a coherent national project. To be sure, under Vladimir Putin's presidency a new impulse was given to the interpretation of Russia's national identity. In this sense, Western neo-liberalism and Atlantist thrusts, which marked part of the Yeltsin era, were replaced by a conservative narrative which combines nationalism and patriotism, neo-imperialism and Christian Orthodoxy, in ways that were often close to – and yet quite distant from – the principles of neo-Eurasianism. The eclectic mixture of liberalism, neo-communism, and nationalism that characterised Putin's presidency epitomises the complex transition from Soviet rule to democracy. Concepts such as 'sovereign democracy' were brought forth to describe the peculiarity of the Russian political system. At the international level, the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and the subsequent annexation of Crimea relaunched Russian ambitions in the country's former sphere of influence (the so-called 'Near Abroad', which comprises the former state members of the Soviet Union). Besides military expansionism – often dubbed as Russian return to 'old-fashioned geopolitics' – in recent years Russia has considerably invested in improving its soft power, that is, in developing its cultural, diplomatic, and media apparatuses. At the same time, the 'Russian World' (*Russkiy Mir*) idea – an ambiguous term alternatively employed to define the Russian diaspora, the Russian-speaking population in the 'Near Abroad', and the eponymous foundation for the promotion of the Russian language – emerged from the shadows of nationalist intellectual circles and began to grow in popularity. By transcending the borders of the Russian Federation, the 'Russian World' idea rejects the idea of an ethnic state and projects, instead, Russianness abroad as it proposes a national identity based on cultural and linguistic factors. But most importantly, it provides an imaginary geography of Russia in a globalized – or, more properly, *globalizing* – world.

Bibliography

Alekseev, Veniamin V. 2015. "The Russian Idea: From Messianism to Pragmatism." *Russian Social Science Review* 56 (3): 2-17.

Anbarani, Ata. 2013. "Nation, Nationalism in Controversial Debates and Thought: A Review of Origin of Nation and Nationalism." *Canadian Social Science* 9 (3): 61-67.

Astrov, Alexander and Natalia Morozova. 2012. "Russia: Geopolitics from the Heartland." In *The Return of Geopolitics in Europe? Social Mechanisms and Foreign Policy Identity Crises*, edited by Stefano Guzzini, 192-216. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bassin, Mark. 1991. "Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geographical Space." *Slavic Review* 50 (1): 1-17.

Bassin, Mark. 1993. "Turner, Solov'ev, and the 'Frontier Hypothesis': The Nationalist Signification of Open Spaces." *The Journal of Modern History* 65 (3): 473-511.

Berdyaev, Nikolai. 1948a. *The Origin of Russian Communism*. Glasgow: Geoffrey Bles.

Berdyaev, Nikolai. 1948b. *The Russian Idea*. New York: MacMillan.

Birch, Anthony H. 1989. *Nationalism and national integration*. London: University of Victoria, British Colombia.

Boym, Svetlana. 1995. "From the Russian soul to post-communist nostalgia." *Representations* 49: 133-166.

Dugin, Aleksandr G. 2004. *Eurasia: La Rivoluzione Conservatrice in Russia*. Roma: Nuove Idee.

Dugin, Aleksandr G. 2012. *The Fourth Political Theory*. London: Arktos.

Dugin, Aleksandr G. 2014. *Eurasian Mission: An Introduction to Neo-Eurasianism*. London: Arktos.

Dugin, Aleksandr G. 2015. *Last War of the World-Island*. London: Arktos.

Dugin, Aleksandr G. 2017. *The Rise of the Fourth Political Theory*. London: Arktos.

Filler, André. 2010. "L'identité nationale russe: Anatomie d'une représentation." *Hérodote* 3: 94-108.

Groys, Boris. 1992. "Russia and the West: The quest for Russian national identity." *Studies in Soviet Thought* 43 (3): 185-198.

Gumilyov, Lev N. 1989. "Pis'mo v redaktsiyu 'Voprosov filosofii'." *Voprosy filosofii* 5.

Gumilyov, Lev N. 1992. *Ot Rusi do Rossii*. Saint Petersburg: Iuna.

Gumilyov, Lev. N. 1993. "Zametki Poslednego Yevrasiitsa." In *Ritmy Yevrasii: Epokhi i Tsivilizatsii*. Moscow: Progress.

Haushofer, Karl. 1931. *Geopolitik der Pan-Ideen*. Berlin: Zentral-Verlag.

Haushofer, Karl. 1934. *Weltpolitik von Heute*. Berlin: Zeitgeschichte Verlag.

Johnston, Robert H. 1988. *New Mecca, New Babylon: Paris and the Russian Exiles, 1920-1945*. Montréal: McGill Queen's University Press.

Laruelle, Marlène. 2008. *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

Mackinder, Halford J. 1904. "The Geographical Pivot of History." *The Geographical Journal* 23 (4): 421-437.

Mackinder, Halford J. 1919. *Democratic Ideals and Realities: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*. London: Constable & Co. Ltd.

Mackinder, Halford J. 1943. "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace." *Foreign Affairs* 21 (4): 595-605.

Mikkeli, Heikki. 1998. *Europe as an Idea and an Identity*. Berlin: Springer.

Morozov, Vyatcheslav E. 2009. *Rossiya i Drugie: Identichnost' i Granitsy Politicheskogo Soobshestva*. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe.

Neumann, Iver. 1996. *Russia and the Idea of Europe. A study in identity and international relations*. London: Routledge.

Panarin, Aleksandr S. 1995. *Rossiya v Tsivilizatsionnom Protsesse. Mezdhu Atlantizmom i Yevrasiistvom*. Moscow: Institut Filosofii RAN.

Panarin, Aleksandr S. 1999. *Rossiya v Tsiklakh Mirovoy Istorii*. Moscow: Izdatelstvo Moskovskogo Universiteta.

Panarin, Aleksandr S. 2002. *Pravoslavnaya Tsivilizatsiya v Global'nom Mire*. Moscow: Algoritm.

Pizzolo, Paolo. 2020. *Eurasianism: An Ideology for the Multipolar World*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Poltoratzsky, Nikolai P. 1962. "The Russian Idea of Berdyaev." *The Russian Review* 21 (2): 121-136.

Savitsky, Pyotr N. 1933. *Shestina Sveta: Rusko yako Zempepisni a Historitski Tselek*. Prague: Melantrich.

Schmitt, Carl. 2003. *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*. New York: Telos.

Smith, Anthony D. 2010. *Nationalism*. Cambridge: Polity.

Solovyov, Sergey M. 1962. *Istoriya Rossii s Drevneishikh Vremen: v pyatnatsati knigakh*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoy literatury.

Stein, Howard F. 1976. "Russian Nationalism and the Divided Soul of the Westernizers and Slavophiles." *Ethos* 4 (4): 403-438.

Tolz, Vera. 2001. *Russia. Inventing the Nation.* London: Arnold.

Trubetskoy, Nikolai S. 1920. *Yevropa i Chelovechestvo*. Sofia: Russko-Bolgarskoe Knigoizdatel'stvo.

Trubetskoy, Nikolai S. 1923. "Vavilonskaya Bashnia i Smeshenie Yazikov." *Yevrasiyskiy Vremennik* 3.

Trubetskoy, Nikolai S. 1927. "Verkhi i Nizy Russkoi Kul'tury." In *K Problema Russkogo Samopoznaniya*. Paris: Yevrasiskoye Knigoizdatel'stvo.

Trubetskoy, Nikolai S. 1993. "O Turasnkom Elemente v Russkoi Kul'ture." In *Rossiya mezhdu Yevropoi i Aziei: Yevrasiskiy Soblazn*. Moscow: Nauka.

Widdis, Emma. 2004. "Russia as Space." In *National Identity in Russian Culture: An Introduction*, edited by Simon Franklin and Emma Widdis, 30-49. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Paolo Pizzolo is Research Fellow in International Relations at the University LUISS Guido Carli of Rome. He holds a PhD in Political Science and International Relations.

Email: ppizzolo@luiss.it

Emmanuele Quarta is PhD candidate in Science of Human Relations at the University of Bari and at the University of Paris 8.

Email: emmanuele.quarta@uniba.it