

## Eurasia, Eurasianism, Eurasian Union

### TERMINOLOGICAL GAPS AND OVERLAPS

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Ever since Vladimir Putin launched the Eurasian Union project in 2011, scholars and the media have tended to analyze it as the victory of the Eurasianist ideology. This memo investigates the relationship between Eurasia, Eurasianism, and the Eurasian Union project. In looking at this specific relationship, I hope to capture the fact that ideas, ideologies, and doctrines, on the one hand, and ongoing political, institutional, and economic evolutions, on the other, may not be directly and causally connected.

The term “Eurasia” largely attained greater visibility for want of something better: it expresses conveniently, and in a rather intuitive way, the historical space of Russia and its “peripheries.” The term is not free of presuppositions, as it assumes a minimal geographical, if not geopolitical, unity between post-Soviet countries, or at least part of them. It also contains a fundamental terminological ambiguity: is it Europe *and* Asia, or *neither* Europe *nor* Asia? “Eurasia” was originally a geographical term coined to designate countries located on the Euro-Asian tectonic plate, thus covering both Europe and Asia. Even in its restricted meaning of being neither Europe nor Asia, but a median space of Russia and its neighbors, the term provokes debate on who does or does not belong to it.

Despite its limitations, the term has replaced “post-Soviet” in many North American, European, and Asian academic institutions and international organizations, as a way to describe the post-Soviet space without referring to the Soviet legacy. Paradoxically, it is used to describe Russia *and* the new states as well as the new states *without* Russia. In this way, it is given the adjective of *Central* Eurasia to encompass all the “others” of Russia: both external others—Central Asia, South Caucasus, Mongolia—and internal ones—North Caucasian, Tatar, Bashkir, and Siberian cultures.

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## **Eurasia and Eurasianism are Plural Notions**

The Russian language does not distinguish between Eurasian (a purely geographical definition) and Eurasianist (an ideological belief in the unity of this region): both are expressed as *evraziiskii*. Similarly, a Eurasian, in the sense of a person who lives in Eurasia or was born of a mixed Euro-Asian marriage, and an ideologue of Eurasianism will both be called *Evraziitsev*. Even since its founding at the start of the 1920s, Eurasianist ideology has been defined as *evraziistvo* (*-stvo* being the suffix of abstraction, while *-izm* is that of doctrine), which thus potentially leaves a semantic space open for *evrazizm* to emerge with another meaning, but no such neologism has yet been forged.

There are myriad Eurasianisms – from the classic version seen in the founding fathers of the 1920s-1930s, to Lev Gumilev’s version during Soviet times, to neo-Eurasianisms, such as that promoted by the infamous geopolitician Alexander Dugin, who is also a vocal supporter of an updated fascist doctrine. The collapse of the Soviet Union multiplied narratives on the theme of Eurasia. They are to be found in present-day Russia but also in some of the other post-Soviet states, in particular Kazakhstan, where it functions as an official doctrine for a state that presents itself as an encounter between East and West, Europe and Asia, Russia and the East. Many neo-Eurasianisms are also present in the Russian Federation: in autonomous republics, some political figures and scholarly groups elaborate their own local versions of neo-Eurasianism, wielding it as a tool that allows for claims of localism and of loyalty to the Russian state. Tatarstan has been at the forefront of this trend, followed by Yakutia-Sakha. Multiple local variations have taken shape in Bashkortostan, Buryatia, Tuva, Kalmykia, and elsewhere.

Neo-Eurasianisms are also temporally diverse, insofar as their narratives have evolved over the past two decades. At the start of the 1990s they were used primarily to compensate for the Soviet collapse, offering a way of thinking about the suddenly fragmented post-Soviet space as a unity without referencing Communism. In the 2000s, the Kremlin’s rehabilitation of the Soviet past as the key common dominator of Russian society, together with nostalgia for the late Soviet decades, weakened the originality of neo-Eurasianisms. They made their return, however, with the emergence of the Eurasian Union project—an old scheme promoted by Kazakhstan’s president Nursultan Nazarbayev in 1994, but updated by Putin in 2011 to fit current tastes.

This new Eurasian Union is diverse too. The Eurasian Union strictly speaking is an aspirational project with a clear political endpoint—the recreation of some supra-national institutions—that is backed mostly by Putin and the Kremlin, with little enthusiasm from other countries. The Eurasian Economic Union is a different project, which include several member states: Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and probably Armenia. Seen from Moscow, Minsk, Astana, Bishkek, or Yerevan, it is each time imbued with a different color. The Kazakh case is the most divergent, as it has its own ideological genealogy, separated from the Russian one, and based on Nazarbayev’s

personal legitimacy. Last but not least, the member states are not the only ones that give an interpretation of what the Eurasian Economic Union is: the Eurasian Commission, the first genuinely supranational post-Soviet body, has its own institutional practice and dynamism that often contradict the objectives of member states.

### **Eurasia without Eurasianism?**

In Russia, the term “Eurasia” has easily made a mark thanks to a certain terminological vacuum, enabling it to be adapted to shifting contexts and different realities. Under the label “Eurasia,” it is possible to express a geopolitical principle—that is, Russia’s claim to be the “pivotal” state and “engine” of the post-Soviet world, and its right to oversee the strategic orientations of its neighbors. But the term can also be used to designate a philosophical principle—that is, Russia’s status as the “other Europe,” an already old notion expressed by the Slavophiles in the first half of the nineteenth century. In this case, “Eurasia” is above all a *mirror* of Europe and the West, a *response* to what is perceived as a challenge that would undermine Russianness, and an *alternative* to what is seen as the deadlock of liberalism as ideology and the West as a civilization. Lastly, the term “Eurasia” points to a third dimension, that of memory, mourning, and commemoration. Through it, Russian society can understand the imperial and Soviet experiences: it enables it to make peace with the lost past, closing these historical chapters, at the same time integrating them into a national grand narrative.

It is probably the way that the term can inhabit the juncture of these different dimensions that explains its success and its instrumentalization by Russian authorities. Indeed, when Vladimir Putin launched his Eurasian Union project, his speech articulated several dimensions. He proclaimed that reintegrating the post-Soviet space under its leadership is Russia’s “natural” geopolitical destiny and that the country cannot be denied this vocation. He stated that the European Union has been a successful model to follow, and that Russia should offer an “EU-like” construction for Eurasia but also increasingly engage in a discourse criticizing liberal principles and call on Europe to remember its “true” (read: conservative) values. Last but not least, he accelerated the previous trend of rehabilitating Russia’s Soviet and, to a lesser extent, imperial past, in the hope that citizens’ pride in their country and its legacy would be replicated as support for the regime.

But what is the role of Eurasianism in this Eurasia? Even if the founding fathers of Eurasianism such as Nikolai Trubetskoi or Petr Savitskii were all republished with large print runs at the beginning of the 1990s, as were all the great authors of the Russian Silver Age, and reintegrated into the national pantheon, they enjoy only academic success. In Kremlin circles, the preference is to refer to conservative thinkers with a clear political message such as Konstantin Leonte and Ivan Ilyin rather than to the Eurasianists, who are not on Putin’s communication gurus’ list of “must-read” authors. In the autonomous republics and in Kazakhstan, the scholarly circles that celebrate

Gumilev are much more interested in his concepts of “ethnos” and “passionarity” than that of Eurasia, and they do not return to the founding fathers. Dugin borrows his entire repertoire from the German Conservative Revolution and from the French and Italian New Right far more than from the Eurasianist circles of the emigration. As for the high senior officials in charge of the Customs Union and Eurasian Union institutions, they derive inspiration from founding European texts such as that of Jean Monnet, or from Beijing’s rhetoric of Chinese-style harmonious development, but not from Eurasianism.

### **Shared Assumptions, Disparate Projects**

Eurasianism and the Eurasian Union project share a similar vision of the fluidity of the term Eurasia. They both conflate Eurasia as the space that Russia has historically dominated and as the shared Euro-Asian continent, and tend to merge the definitions whenever they need to demonstrate the critical role of the strictly defined Eurasia within the broader one. They also overlap the territory of Eurasia with that of the Soviet Union, with some subtractions and additions. All consider the Baltic states to be part of Europe but not Eurasia. The Eurasianists tend to add Mongolia to their definition but subtract the South Caucasus, while the Eurasian Union project aims to hold onto the South Caucasus but does not have much interest in Mongolia.

In both cases, there exists a core group of Eurasian countries, Russia and parts of Ukraine and Kazakhstan, that represent the historical interaction between the Slavic and steppe worlds. In both cases, Ukraine is seen as a divided country, fractured by a “civilizational” line of divide between Europe and Eurasia, where eastern Ukraine is integrated into Eurasia and western Ukraine is seen to be moving toward its European destiny. To this core group can be added some concentric circles of other countries that are welcome to join, but with secondary roles: the sedentary and more Islamic Central Asia and Christian Armenia and Georgia. A third concentric circle includes countries that are outside the strictly defined Eurasia but are potential “bedfellows”: Eurasianists have traditionally mentioned Iran and Japan, while the Eurasian Union prefers Vietnam, Syria, and Egypt as potential free trade partners.

However, the overlap between Russian Eurasianism and the Eurasian Union stops there. As we delve into the contents of the Eurasian project, in terms of political values and economic politics, critical dissonances soon emerge. The Eurasian Union takes nothing from (neo-)Eurasianism in defining a political and economic strategy for the region. No official text produced in Russia about the Eurasian Union mentions Eurasianism as an ideology. Dugin has not been given any official status since the coming into force of the Eurasian Economic Union; he is not a member of the Public Chamber and he even lost his position at Moscow State University since the onset of the Ukraine conflict.

## Conclusion

Eurasianism predates the Eurasian Union. It has its own intellectual genealogy and its doctrinaires have not been co-opted by the Kremlin. Eurasianism connects mostly to the sphere of metapolitics and operates independently of the regime's political project, the rationale of which is far more pragmatic and based on other kinds of references. Hence the strange destiny of a movement, Eurasianism, that has contributed to shaping Russian intellectual life in the twentieth century but which is today both central and forgotten. The more "Eurasia" invades Russia's public space, popular culture, and state-produced narratives in Russia, the more forgetful of its Eurasianist founding ideologists it seems to be. The production of ideas, their agents, and places of production should thus be given more attention. We need to examine the deployment of terms and their operationalization before taking a restraining shortcut of conflating metapolitics with state strategies.

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