

ECEAP analysis: Russian Geopolitical Thinking and the EU Eastern Partners

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Abstract

The geopolitical thinking and activities have been prevalent in Russian foreign policy discussions. Russian leaders have stressed the need to hold the former USSR republics under Russian influence. This has particularly influenced the political situation of European Union's Eastern partnership countries. Russia under President Vladimir Putin has developed a dual-track approach to challenge the keeping of Russia's neighbors under its influence. First track has been proposals to neighbors to join integration projects led by Russia, like Eurasian Economic Union, with promises to grant economic access to Russian markets. The other track has been punitive and directed against these neighbors, who have chosen democratic and Western orientation. In this case Russia is using its military might for dismembering those states or supporting separatist regimes in those states. Putin's original proposal was that Russia and its partners should set an ambitious goal of reaching a higher level of integration – the Eurasian Union. However, the Russia's partners who joined Eurasian Economic Union saw it as an economic cooperation format. The main element missing was Ukrainian participation. As a result Russia decided for retaining its influence in Ukraine to annex Crimea and create separatist regimes in Eastern Ukraine. Putin's geopolitical agenda is supported in Russia by vibrant tradition of geopolitical thinking in the form of Eurasianism (e.g. Aleksandr Dugin).

Russia's Dual-Track Approach to Influencing its Neighbors

The geopolitical thinking and activities have been prevalent in Russian foreign policy discussions since the dissolution of Soviet Union. Russian leaders have stressed the need to hold the former USSR republics together and under Russian influence in one form or another. This has particularly influenced the political situation of those Russia's neighbors, which have become European Union's Eastern partnership countries.

One could say that Russia under President Vladimir Putin has developed a dual-track approach to challenge the keeping of Russia's neighbors under its influence. First track has been proposals to neighbors to join integration projects led by Russia, like Eur-

asian Economic Union, with promises of granting economic access to Russian markets (including EU Eastern partners Belarus and Armenia). The other track has been punitive and directed against these neighbors, who have chosen democratic and Western orientation, by using Russian military might for dismembering those states (annexation of Crimea from Ukraine) or supporting separatist regimes in those states (Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia and separatist regimes in Eastern Ukraine), who want to break away/join with Russia.

There is also been clear difference in Russian attitudes toward authoritarian governments (like Belarus, Central Asia countries and Azerbaijan and until recently Armenia), and countries with democratic and Western orientation (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine). Russian government sees democratic and Western orientation not only as a foreign policy challenge but an issue with ramifications for Russian internal politics, as a “negative example” that could destabilize authoritarian regime in Russia itself. Therefore Russian foreign policy attitude has been critical about all aspects of their policies, compared to neutral or positive attitude towards its neighbors with authoritarian regimes. For example while Russia has been criticizing its democratic and Western orientated neighbors because of alleged mistreating their Russian minorities, it has not been openly critical of policies of Central Asian countries, from which considerable number of members of Russian minorities have actually left during the last decades.

Under Putin, Russia has seen Western promises of future NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia given in NATO Bucharest summit 2008¹ as a direct challenge to its dominance over former USSR geopolitical space. First victim of Russian policy to counter NATO enlargement was Georgia, which lost as the result of 2008 Russian-Georgian war the control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Russian authorities have later confessed² that Russian aggression was preplanned and targeted to countering country's NATO membership aspirations.

In fact 2014 Russian military doctrine³ lists as first of main external military risks to Russia the build-up of the power potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and vesting NATO with global functions carried out in violation of the rules of international law, bringing the military infrastructure of NATO member countries near the borders of the Russian Federation, including by further expansion of the alliance.

¹ NATO Bucharest Summit Declaration. 3 April 2008. https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/official_texts_8443.htm

² Pavel Felgenhauer, Putin Confirms the Invasion of Georgia Was Preplanned. – Eurasia Daily Monitor. Vol. 9, Issue 152. 9 August 2012. <https://jamestown.org/program/putin-confirms-the-invasion-of-georgia-was-preplanned/>

³ The Military Doctrine of The Russian Federation. 25 December 2014. <https://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029>

Russia, its Neighbors and the Eurasian Economic Union

The original loose cooperation format of former USSR republics (minus Baltic States) was CIS, Commonwealth of Independent States, which was created in 1991. As Russia soon found out, it did not grant Russia the sphere of influence over its neighbors. In 2011 the then Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin established a goal of forming of the new entity, Eurasian Economic Union. In 2014 EAEU treaties were signed between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan and later same year also Kirghizstan and Armenia. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was then formally established in January 2015 with the aim of integrating post-Soviet states, including Russia, into a new cohesive economic entity. It should be mentioned that Belarus and Armenia are also EU's Eastern Partners. Armenia took snap decision to join EAEU and not to conclude association agreement with EU under strong pressure from Russia.⁴

Kataryna Wolczuk and Rilka Dragneva's have made the case in their recent Chatham House Report⁵ that the EAEU "is the primary vehicle for [Russia] realizing a global geopolitical agenda." The key benefit for Russia is the construction of a regional bloc to overcome what the country sees as the loss of power and control in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Further Eurasian integration is one of Russia's key strategies to re-build its status on the international stage. Russia's main benefits from the EAEU are political rather than economic. The EAEU accounts for only 5 per cent of Russia's trade – the bulk of the country's exports go to the rest of the world. Russia's original plan for integration was essentially political rather than merely economic. At the outset of the EAEU, the Kremlin aimed to establish a comprehensive union, encompassing monetary union and political and defense integration. However, this far-reaching agenda was rejected by other would be member states, particularly Kazakhstan, which succeeded in its efforts to limit the EAEU to economic integration.

It is clear from here that the Russia's partners saw EAEU as economic cooperation format. Russia however wished, according to Putin⁶ that the EAEU should be there-after developing in to political entity the Eurasian Union. Putin original proposal was that Russia and its partners should set an ambitious goal of reaching a higher level of integration – a Eurasian Union. He stated that "these times" call for close integration based on new values and a new political and economic foundation. Putin suggested a creation of powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world and serving as an efficient bridge between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region.

⁴ Richard Giragosian, Armenia's Strategic U-Turn. European Council of Foreign Relations. Policy Memo. April 2014. http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR99_ARMENIA_MEMO_AW.pdf

⁵ Kataryna Wolczuk, Rilka Dragneva, The Eurasian Economic Union: Deals, Rules and the Exercise of Power. Chatham House. 2 May 2017. <https://reader.chathamhouse.org/eurasian-economic-union-deals-rules-and-exercise-power#>

⁶ Vladimir Putin, A New Integration Project for Eurasia: The Future in the Making. – Izvestia, 3 October 2011. (Cf. Homepage of Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union) <https://russiaeu.ru/en/news/article-prime-minister-vladimir-putin-new-integration-project-eurasia-future-making-izvestia-3->

Putin suggested that the Eurasian Union is an open project. A state must only join on its sovereign decision based on its long-term national interests. Here Putin referred that some of Russia's neighbors explain their lack of interest in joining forward-looking integration projects in the post-Soviet space by saying that these projects contradict their pro-European stance. Putin stressed that this is a false antithesis. He argued that joining Eurasian Union was not intended to cut members off, or planning to stand in opposition to anyone.

Predicament of Ukraine

It is clear that this part of Putin's 2011 article was directed towards Ukraine, which originally did not want to join EAEU, but is crucial to any Russian scheme fully controlling former USSR territory. Putin's promise that membership in EAEU is based on sovereign decision of each state was put to test in the case of Ukraine. When Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich decided under pressure from Moscow in Fall 2013 to abandon Association Agreement talks with EU, it led to popular uprising and change of government in Ukraine at the February of 2014. Moscow's reaction to establishment new Europe orientated Ukraine was denouncing new pro-European government as a fascist hunta. Gone were the promises that a joining of regional cooperation projects is sovereign decision of each country. To defend what Putin saw as a Russian geopolitical interest the answer to changes in Ukraine was the illegal annexation of Crimea February-March 2014 and following attempts to break eastern and southern parts of country away from central control with the goal of creating Novorossia puppet state. Although the last goal was realized only partially (the creation of so called Lugansk and Donetsk republics in Russia controlled territory), the Russia has succeeded into turning the conflict into permanent low level conflict, that seriously hinders Ukraine's intents of Western integration, notwithstanding promises that Russia gave to Western partners in context of Minsk agreements. From geopolitical perspective it important to note, that Russia excluded US and UK from Normandy format (Russia, Ukraine, Germany, France) that negotiated the Ukraine's ceasefire with its separatist regions. One could also say that after the Ukraine's decision to choose Western integration direction the Russia's interests toward EAEU has waned considerably, which shows geopolitical nature of its original interest to use integration project to achieve dominance in post-soviet space and use combined weight of integrated states for becoming stronger pole in hoped for multipolar system.

On his speech on occasion of annexation of Crimea⁷ Putin stressed not only historical and ethnic links between Russia and peninsula, but also geopolitical factors. He stressed that when USSR ended many people both in Russia and in Ukraine, as well

⁷ Full Text of Putin's Speech on Crimea. Prague Post. 19 March 2014
<https://www.praguepost.com/eu-news/37854-full-text-of-putin-s-speech-on-crimea>

as in other republics hoped that the Commonwealth of Independent States that was created at the time would become the new common form of statehood. They were told that there would be a single currency, a single economic space, and joint armed forces; however, all this remained empty promises, while the big country was gone. It was only when Crimea ended up as part of a different country that Russia realized that it was not simply robbed, it was plundered. After describing changes in Ukraine and its foreign policy orientation, Putin stressed that that this strategic territory should become part of a strong and stable sovereignty, which today can only be Russian. He noted that “Russia has already heard declarations from Kiev about Ukraine soon joining NATO. What would this have meant for Crimea and Sevastopol in the future? It would have meant that NATO’s navy would be right there in this city of Russia’s military glory, and this would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia. For all the internal processes within the organization, NATO remains a military alliance, and we are against having a military alliance making itself at home right in our backyard or in our historic territory”. Here we can clearly see geopolitical argumentation behind Russian actions and continuity of aggressive policy already used against Georgia 2008.

The Roots of Eurasianist Ideology in Russia

To explain influences behind Putin’s geopolitical thinking one should remember that in post-Soviet Russia there is vibrant tradition of geopolitical thinking in the form of Eurasianism⁸. To understand the most influential strand of this school of thought, expansionist Eurasianism, one could turn towards ideas proposed by Russia’s leading Eurasianist geopolitical thinker Aleksandr Dugin. In “Foundations of Geopolitics”⁹ Dugin calls for ending the influence of the United States and Atlanticism in Eurasia (and Europe) and calls Russia to rebuild its influence in Eurasian continent through annexations and alliances. Dugin declares that “the battle for the world rule of Russians” has not ended and Russia remains “the staging area of a new anti-bourgeois, anti-American revolution.” The Eurasian Empire will be constructed “on the fundamental principle of the common enemy: the rejection of Atlanticism, strategic control of the USA, and the refusal to allow liberal values to dominate us.”

Dugin sees Russia and its neighbors forming separate Eurasian civilization and geopolitical space (Heartland) which is different from Anglo-Saxon dominated Western civilization, which controls Europe’s and Asia’s maritime areas (Rimland). According Dugin’s vision Russia is destined to be imperial nation (and will cease to exist if it could not

⁸ A. P. Tsygankov. Mastering Space in Eurasia: Russia’s Geopolitical Thinking after the Soviet Break-up. – Communist and Post-Communist Studies Vol. 36, Issue 1, 2003, pp 101–127.

https://is.muni.cz/do/fss/57816/40125114/Tsygankov_A_Mastering_Space_Euroasia_Comm.Studies_36_2003.pdf

⁹ Александр Дугин, Основы Геополитики. Москва: Арктогея, 2000. <http://arctogaia.com/public/osnovygeo/>

become an empire again) that unites Eurasian territories in opposition to Anglo-Saxon world powers, especially USA. Dugin argues that Russia should work for destroying links between continental European powers Germany and France and with USA and UK, and then establishing links between Russian dominated Eurasia and Germany dominated continental Europe countries. According to Dugin's only great powers are truly sovereign participants of world affairs and sovereignty of small states should be ignored. According to Dugin the Russia's Western neighbors form "cordon sanitaire" which is meant to keep Russia weak and Russia and Germany apart. Especially the existence of independent Ukraine is inimical to idea of recreating powerful Russia. According to Dugin Byelorussia is basically Russian in character, as is Eastern Ukraine and northern Kazakhstan. Those areas should annexed to Russia. The other neighbors of Russia should be dominated by new Eurasian empire and can have limited autonomy.

One of the main ideologists of Putin's regime Vladislav Surkov has pointed out¹⁰ the Russian attempts to integrate with West ended with the events of 2014 and that Russia should be ready for a long lasting geopolitical loneliness that could last hundred years. According to Surkov, in 2014 it was decided (in Russian leadership) to end the period of Russian "self-depreciation and self-belittlement" in the attempt to integrate with Western world and start to fight back. However Surkov, as different from Eurasianists, does not see Russia as a separate civilization but as a mixture of European and Asian elements, which does not belong anywhere and has no natural allies.

Conclusion

Looking backward one could only be impressed how many Eurasianist ideas proposed in the turn of millennium were later realized in actual Russian foreign policy in the beginning of XXI century. It remains to be seen will the Western sanctions that have been adopted as the result of Russian aggression against Ukraine be able to contain Russia's further attempts to dominate its neighbors, or will Russia continue its policy aimed to establish control over geopolitical Eurasian space by carrot and stick policies, including direct military interventions against its neighbors. As a negative sign, Russia is continuing participation in military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, and also continues military buildup that started after Russian-Georgian war. It would be possible perhaps to see a sign of incremental change in Russia's attitude in its acceptance of recent peaceful revolution in EAEU country Armenia. However, what is certain, is the fact that Russia's aggressive policy has failed to stop Ukraine's, Georgia's and Moldova's movement toward Western world. All these countries have achieved Association and Free Trade agreements, as well as visa free movement of persons with EU and they are continuing Euroatlantic integration policies.

¹⁰ Владислав Сурков. Одиночество полукровки (14+). – Россия в глобальной политике. 9 апреля 2018. <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/global-processes/Odinochestvo-polukrovki-14-19477>