

To Make a Bridge: Eurasian Discourse in the Post-Soviet World

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Introduction

Eurasianism was long viewed as an exclusively “Russian imperial ideology.” Yet as this ideology gains popularity throughout the post-Soviet region, both within and beyond Russia, nowadays, Russian ideologists have lost the monopoly over Eurasianism. The Eurasian constructs and rhetoric are extensively and beneficially used by some non-Russian native intellectuals and politicians for the construction of a new ethno-political reality. Sometimes they are searching for a desired place for their own ethnic groups within the multi-cultural environment of contemporary Russia; other times they seek new all-embracing alliances on the basis of an imagined common cultural history. At the same time, native Eurasian constructs usually reject the Russian-style neo-Eurasianism as a “new imperialism.” Mainly, the Eurasian idea is characterized by its connections with anti-globalism and anti-westernist movements although it sometimes addresses human rights issues as well. Moreover, new Eurasian projects get into lively and, by no means, easy dialogue with each other.

Thus, the Eurasian cultural-political concept that was developed in a particular environment and was aimed at a distinct political goal is being revised and re-interpreted by radically different actors, pursuing very different goals. For example, the Eurasian rhetoric, metaphors, and mythologies are appreciated and exploited by non-Russian nationalists no less skillfully and effectively than their Russian counterparts. To put it otherwise, while providing freedom of speech for the formerly “silent groups,” the postmodern framework makes the contemporary political discourse highly polyphonic. It is well known that post-colonial ideologies, nourished by their colonial heritage, eagerly accommodate this rhetoric, filled with new content though, in order to use its ideological mechanisms for their own purposes. My ambition is to study why, how, and in what contexts the “alien ideology” proves to be compatible with local nationalisms as well as what its goals are.

The Eurasian project began with Russian emigrants who believed that the rise of ethno-national movements represented a threat to the integrity of the Russian empire. While associating a threat of disintegration with ethno-cultural and religious particularism, the Eurasianists wanted to marginalize undesired regional identities (pan-Turkism, pan-Iranism, pan-Finnism, and the like) and to replace them with an all-embracing Eurasian identity that could unite all the peoples of Russia in a single entity. This idea was first formulated in the early twentieth century by Prince Nikolai Trubetskoi in his well-known article “Pan-Eurasian nationalism” (Trubetskoi 1927).

From the very beginning, Eurasianism proved to be highly contradictory and included political and cultural ideas that could hardly be compatible in practical terms. For example, it

declared an equality of peoples and stood for the protection of ethnic cultures. However, those cultures were provided with only a provincial status and were deprived of any political and educational basis. Resisting the forces of imperialism and globalization, Eurasianism promoted isolationism (autarchy) and suggested a one party system, führerism and ideocracy as the political ideal. It aspired to consolidate a society on the basis of a cultural-historical unity rather than an adherence to democracy. Finally, one of the core ideas of this movement was the conversion of all people to Russian Orthodoxy which, in the long run, demanded the elimination of religious pluralism in Russia.

The Eurasian theory, however, permitted various interpretations and could thus be effectively exploited by various nationalisms. This had already become clear during the 1920s and 1930s when some non-Russian nationalists treated it as a new manifestation of “Russian imperialism,” while others attempted to accommodate its arguments for their own benefits (Shnirelman 2001). All those debates remained a certain exotic emigrant heritage until the late 1980s when Eurasianism suddenly proved to be in high demand and began to affect real politics. Over the last twenty years the Eurasian ideas were extensively discussed by the political and intellectual elites both in Russia and in certain post-Soviet countries (and even in Turkey) (Laruelle 2008). Whereas during the 1920s and 1930s most non-Russian nationalist thinkers treated Eurasianism negatively, in post-Soviet times their heirs found that, by re-interpreting, it could be used as a strong argument in favor of their own projects.

Today, it is obvious that a revival of Eurasianism was affected by various political factors. Its expansion was launched by the Communist leaders themselves at the time, when the days of the former communist ideology were already numbered, and Soviet unity was rapidly disintegrating. In those last years of *perestroika* Soviet authorities made incredible efforts to arrest this process of erosion. It was at that time that they recalled Eurasianism. An article with a positive coverage of it came out in the last issue of the well-known journal *Communist* before it changed its title to reflect democratization (Isaev 1991).

In this environment, Eurasianism was expected to be a new, all-embracing ideology that would be able to rescue the integrity of the USSR through an appeal to cultural-historical rather than Marxist (class struggle) arguments. To put it differently, an emphasis has been made on those ideological tools that have beneficially served many different nationalist movements throughout the years. Yet, it was too late to save the USSR from collapse, and the desired all-Soviet nationalism never materialized. Instead, as we will see further on, cultural-historical arguments were highly appreciated by various post-Soviet nationalisms both within and beyond Russia. They used Eurasianism instrumentally; that is, each of them borrowed from its rich and variable heritage those elements that might perfectly serve a desired goal.

Indeed, Eurasianism provided arguments for the construction of a great many different regional alliances aimed towards particular ends. One could find there arguments supporting economic integration that helped separate states to survive in the world of high competition or a maintenance of former cultural space that helped to avoid cultural isolation and degradation. Additionally, one could find the aspirations of ethnic minorities to escape assimilation through

referencing their historical role in the creation of great Eurasian empires. At the same time, Eurasianism contained the idea of a center of gravity that was able to unite and integrate neighboring cultures and civilizations. In the post-Soviet period, this idea was also met with enthusiasm because it allowed certain states to claim the role of a regional power that might serve as such a center of gravity. Thus, the Eurasian idea not only united but also divided as it perpetuated the belief in some forms of hierarchy in societies and states. All of these subtle nuances of Eurasianism deserve special attention and accordingly, will be discussed later in this article.

As the idea of the Slavic-Turkic alliance makes up the core of the neo-Eurasian discourse, I will focus on the Turkic varieties of neo-Eurasianism. I will also discuss its Ukrainian varieties, although only briefly as they have been analyzed in depth elsewhere (Shnirelman 2009). A special approach towards Eurasianism in the North Caucasus will also be examined. Additionally, I will analyze the Armenian and Tajik responses to Turkic Eurasianism.

Different interests – different Eurasianisms

Today, an ambivalent attitude towards Eurasianism can be observed throughout most of what is called Eurasia. There are often opposite views of Eurasianism that develop in a very tense dialogue. Local varieties of Eurasianism usually attract conservative politicians and intellectuals, as well as ultra-nationalists. Liberals are fascinated with Eurasianism much more rarely and usually treat it as an unacceptable conservative doctrine. In any case, original Eurasian ideas are carefully selected and re-interpreted before they are used for desired political projects.

By the twenty-first century, four distinct attitudes towards Eurasianism had manifested themselves in Ukraine. The democrats criticized it as “imperial ideology,” radical nationalists developed their own version of Eurasianism based on the Ukrainianized “imperial ideology,” and policy-makers developed a moderate Ukrainian version of Eurasianism. Radical nationalists, who manifested anti-Western attitudes and lacked any substantial support, became friends with the Russian neo-Eurasians, although this alliance did not last for long. The radicals mostly appreciated irrational geopolitical Eurasian ideas, whereas the policy-makers favored the more pragmatic economic aspect of Eurasianism. Thus, the Ukrainian case demonstrates that people who are less involved in the practical political process are more open to utopian ideas that play on human emotions. And those involved in real policy-making manifest more moderate views; it is this group that sometimes uses Eurasian ideas as an instrument to further their own political designs.

Economic Eurasianism

President Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan is an excellent example of support for a pragmatic Eurasian project aimed at real political and economic gains. While avoiding theoretical speculations, in 1994 he suggested a program of economic cooperation and

integration (“Eurasian Union”) in the post-Soviet world. In particular, he meant joint citizenship and freedom of movement as well as common governmental structures, similar to those of the European Union (Kozlov 1994; Portnikov 1994; also see Laruelle 2008:177). These ideas were discussed at a conference in Almaty in September 1994 whose participants were mainly politicians, rather than scholars, from Russia and Kazakhstan. They recognized the necessity of economic cooperation that might serve for a rapprochement of neighboring countries without any violation of their political sovereignty. They also declared that, “a disintegration of the Eurasian territory contradicts the cosmic-social laws of human development” (Prazauskas 1995).

While suggesting economic cooperation and military security, Nazarbaev emphasized the preservation of the originality of Kazakh culture. Yet his project was structured basically as a solution to political and economic problems that spoiled relationships with Russia, namely the treaty on the Caspian Sea, the Customs treaty, the “Russian issue,” and other similar ones (Kozlov 1998). His project also addressed such issues as human rights, visa regulations, the free movement of citizens, a common currency, a unified system of defense, cooperative activity in the ecological sphere, coordinated politics in culture, science and education, and the introduction of supranational administrative bodies. Russian would serve as the official language, and a new capital - like Kazan’ or Samara, had to be situated somewhere between Europe and Asia (Nazarbaev 1994). Nazarbaev viewed the Eurasian Union as consisting of “equal independent states.” To be sure, his version of Eurasia lacked any Orthodox Christian basis. Instead, he called Islam and Christianity “two wings of Kazakhstan spirituality.” That meant that religion had to play an important symbolic role aimed at a relaxation of interethnic tensions within the state (Nazarbaev 1995).

Official Kazakh ideology relies upon the image of Kazakhstan as the center of the Turkic world that makes up a “bridge between cultures.” Thus, it is the Kazakhs who are represented as the “genuine Eurasian people” and this provides them with symbolic prestige. In Nazarbaev’s view, Kazakhstan is the “epicenter of the world” (Nazarbaev 2001), and its new capital, Astana, is situated “in the heart of Eurasia” (Nazarbaev 2005). These ideas are shared by many Kazakh scholars and have become part of official Kazakh educational curriculum. As a result, according to Marlène Laruelle, Kazakh Eurasianism proves to be a manifestation of the Kazakh nationalism (Laruelle 2008:178-179, 182-187).

However, Nazarbaev’s ideas display some degree of inconsistency. On the one hand, he declares that the state has to champion the interests of the “Kazakh nation,” while, on the other, the state must support a “formation of the political civic Kazakhstan nation” (Nazarbaev 1999:53, 186-187). It seems that this double-dealing is endemic to Eurasianism. At the same time, the opposition in Kazakhstan related to Eurasianism differently and treated it as a manifestation of “Russian imperialism.” Yet even amongst some of Nazarbaev’s opponents there was a dream of a Kazakh variety of Eurasianism, including cultural fundamentalism, elitism, ideocracy and a priority of the nation over the individual (Nurpeisova 1995).

Turning to Uzbekistan we see that its president, Islam Karimov, is highly suspicious towards Russian Eurasianism and envies the diplomatic relations of Nazarbaev. Yet Karimov

does not fail to emphasize the beneficial geographical location of Uzbekistan at the crossroad between East and West and puts his own plan forward to build a “Eurasian economic and cultural bridge” (Karimov 1992:37). In his view, it is Uzbekistan that must play the role of the bridge between Asia and Europe and his disagreement with Nazarbaev is caused by this competition for leadership in Central Asia. In Russia they were also reserved towards the Nazarbaev’s plans, in part due to a similar reason: President Yeltsin feared Nazarbaev’s popularity. Yet the Uzbek elite shared Nazarbaev’s main idea: they desired to bring about modernization with the help of Western technologies but without sacrificing their “cultural originality” (Arapov and Umanskii 1992).

During the Soviet period, in Kyrgyzstan like in other Central Asian republics, Asia was given rather negative media coverage and was portrayed as the Third World associated with poverty, backwardness, illiteracy and disease. People did not want to come back to that sort of Asia. Instead, they are more open to European values and standards of living and that is why many local intellectuals put an emphasis on the intermediate place of their country between East and West. They prefer to identify Central Asia with a separate civilization, even creating the phrase “Central Asian Europe.” At the same time, the term “Eurasian civilization” is less popular. Despite the fact that the idea of “Eurasian civilization” has not enjoyed widespread popularity, there are many potential uses of Eurasian identity. Some Kyrgyz writers refer to Eurasian unity as a way to secure cultural relationships with Russia (Pustynnikov 2000; Elibaeva 1999). And some Uzbek intellectuals referred to the “Europeanness” of Central Asia introduced there during the Soviet period (Mirza-Akhmedova 1999).

Thus, Eurasianism meets rather ambivalent attitudes in Central Asia. To be sure, local elites reject Russian Eurasianism, accusing it of “new imperialism.” Yet they appreciate modernization based on the Western technologies- providing this does not spoil local identities and cultural traditions. It is this amalgamation that is called “Eurasianism” in Central Asia nowadays.

Geopolitical Eurasianism

There is a special kind of Eurasianism in contemporary Azerbaijan. In contrast to what their neighbors think of the “Turkic-Slavic rapprochement,” local analysts worry mostly about the geopolitical role of the Caspian region, which, in their view, is at the core of the confrontation between the West and the East. They appreciate geopolitical categories that were introduced to Russia by Alexander Dugin, and discuss a struggle between Tellurocracy and Tallasocracy, Land and Sea, Eurasianism and Atlanticism as if it were “based on the fundamental law of geopolitics.” It is significant that, in their view, the “heart of Eurasia” is in the Caspian region whose center is Azerbaijan rather than Russia or Kazakhstan. Here is a “junction of civilizations” where “three great superethnoses: Turkic, Slavic and Aryan-Iranian” as well as two worlds (Christian and Muslim) have been in contact for centuries. From this perspective, the Caspian region is a “key to domination over a center of Heartland” from which one can rule over

the world. Yet it is oil and gas resources rather than any spiritual values and *Weltanschauung* that are the point of fierce struggle. In the face of these demands, the Armenian-Azeri conflict deserves no special attention (Darabadi 2003; Aliev 2005). This case demonstrates perfectly well how irrational arguments (centered on the geographic imperative) could be used to gain rational political goals (an aspiration to upgrade the role of Azerbaijan in the contemporary world).

Towards the Slavic-Turkic alliance

Intellectuals and political leaders of the ethnically non-Russian regions of the Russian Federation also demonstrate varying attitudes towards Eurasianism as demonstrated by the Constituent Congress of the Turkic Peoples of the Russian Federation held in the fall of 1995. Its leaders stood for peoples' friendship and cooperation, and stated that the Turkic peoples were active participants in the creation of the Eurasian civilization. The chair of the Congress, Altai writer B. Bediurov, claimed that "we are the Russian Turks, and Russia is our Motherland." He maintained that the Turks were the true Eurasians, "genuine patriots of the USSR and Russia," and they could not but support an idea of the Turkic-Slavic Alliance. He depicted Russia as the only Eurasian state in the world. It was important for him to emphasize that people of the Turkic background participated in the development of the Russian culture and that, over centuries of common life, the "Russian-Turkic superethnos" was shaped based on common spiritual values associated with Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism and even ancient Tengrianism (Bediurov 1993; 1998).

In February 1996 in Moscow there was a conference devoted to the 1450th anniversary of the Turkic Kaganate as the first Turkic state. The celebration was initiated by the leaders of the Republic of Altai, Bashkortostan, Tatarstan and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutiia). They emphasized that the Russian state was the legitimate heir of all the preceding political bodies in Eurasia beginning with the Turkic Kaganate. The Turks were presented as active participants in the state-building in this territory. Therefore, one had to throw away the ridiculous practice of depicting the Turkic peoples as a threat to the Slavic-Christian world. The then President of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutiia), Mikhail Nikolaev underlined that the Turkic Kaganate was the "first Eurasian empire" whose traditions were further developed by the Golden Horde and subsequently inherited by Russia. He agreed with the criticism of Asian political tradition for its despotism, violation of human rights, and careless attitude towards human life. Yet he also pointed to more attractive Eurasian ideas, namely "equality of cultures, mentalities, spiritual world, and historical creativity." He expressed the idea that "a cultural unity of the people was based on their geographical and ethnographic integrity." Therefore, he was proud that the indigenous ethnic groups of the Republic of Sakha maintained their traditional economics. Additionally, he viewed democracy as the people's right for sovereignty rather than viewing democracy within a general framework of human rights. His speech lacked any references to human rights and freedom. Instead, he spoke of the "mighty state" and the "strong authority" (Nikolaev 1996).

This approach was shared by the Yakut writer N. Luginov, who believed that the Eurasian territory was only fit for an imperial political arrangement (Luginov 1998). Yet another native political activist who constructed a “civilization of the Sakha people” viewed the Yakuts as inborn democrats (Tumusov 1998).

Many Turkic intellectuals value a “strong rule” (i.e. security) and are attracted to the image of empire. They believe that ethnic cultures and languages have better chances to survive within an empire rather than in a nation-state viewed as an ethnonational entity. They share an essentialist view of ethnos and treat empire as a rich mosaic of “closed ethnic systems” or an “organic union of the Eurasian peoples with similar mentality” (for example, see Aliev 1998). The “peoples’ [collective] rights” are more important for them than individual “human rights,” an idea that corresponds perfectly to original conception of Eurasianism.

Thus, political and social dimensions of Eurasia, rather than economic considerations are more important for many numerically-small Turkic peoples. Leaders of certain Siberian Turkic peoples (Sakha-Yakuts, Altaians) associate Eurasia with the “Slavic-Turkic Union” and claim that all the Eurasian peoples share some basic values. It is easier for them to develop this image due to their non-Muslim religious identity as Orthodox Christians or shamanists.

The Tatarstan ambivalence and Bashkortostan alarms

Tatarstan occupies a special place in the Eurasian discourse. On the one hand, it is emphasized that Tatarstan is situated at the juncture of various cultures and peoples, East and West (Shaimiev 1994). Yet the tenets of Eurasian messianism, Russocentrism, etatism and “imperialism” are not well-liked (Tagirov I. 1996; Tagirov E. 1996; Usmanov 1996; Makhmutov 1995, 1996). Instead, an emphasis is put on “human rights” and an organic approach together with a “symphonic person” characteristic for the Eurasian ideology is rejected. The Tatar elites are more concerned with the building of genuine democracy and civil society. Yet some Tatar intellectuals aspired to provide the Tatar people with a special place within the Eurasian realm, and appreciated Nazarbaev’s suggestion to make Kazan’ a capital of the future Eurasian Union (Likhachev 1996:8; Zakiev 1996:39; Makhmutov 1995:13). Some Tatar authors argued that the Turks rather than the Russians were the “true Eurasian people.” They emphasized a combination of European and Muslim cultures characteristic for the Turkic world, especially as in Turkey and Tatarstan, and the Tatars were presented as the “main link of the Turkic world” (Mukhametdinov 1996a, 1996b). Being the heirs of the Jadids, the Tatar intellectuals argue that they are more prepared for democracy than the Russians with their “Great Power” ideas. At the same time, they find a positive element in the Eurasian heritage, namely a way to promote integration at the basis of civil society.

However they share a form of ethnic essentialism, claiming that every ethnic group had to be provided with its own statehood. While establishing close relationships between civilization and religion, some Tatar authors do not believe in any Slavic-Turkic or Orthodox-Muslim amalgamation (Khakim 1993:63-64). Besides, they criticize the federal authorities who openly

support the Russian Orthodox Church, of violating the religious equality and balance. Rafael Khakim characterized Russian Eurasianism with its aspiration to secure the territorial integrity of the USSR or of the Russian empire and to restore state mightiness as gains that come at the expense of a reconciliation of the peoples. He viewed empire as a strict authoritarian political system rather than a “symphony of the peoples.” He stood against conservatism and cultural fundamentalism and for a real cultural and religious equality because the Tatars, according to him, appreciated modernization and European values (Khakim 1997, no. 1:34-63, no. 11:31-35).

Basically, Khakim reproduced the ideas of the moderate wing of the Tatar Public Center (TPC), which was very influential in the early 1990s. Initially, TPC, on the one hand, associated the Tatars with the “Turkic” and “Islamic” civilizations, and, on the other, recognized the importance of Western values. Thus, the Tatars were provided the role of mediators between East and West. The more radical “Ittifak” movement shared this approach as well. Yet, in the fall of 1993, the leadership of TPC had been won by Tatar radicals who opposed the “Latin-Catholic” West to the “Turkic-Finnic-Ugric-Slavic” Eurasia with its “Orthodox-Islamic” mentality. Soon they changed their minds and emphasized the peculiarity of “Turkic-Islamic values” whereas the “Russian [essence]” became identified with the Western “social-pragmatic way of life.” But this approach was unable to secure Tatar unity because it created divisions between Muslim and Christian Tatars (Iskhakov 1997:178-183, 186).

Since that time, debates between secular and religious nationalists in Tatarstan have continued. Religious activists believe that unity must be based on Islam. Their opponents put an emphasis on economic unity and included the Christian Tatars (Kriashens and Nagaibaks) who had no room in the Islamic *umma* (Iskhakov 1997:185-186; Mukhametshin 2002:134-140; Khakim 1997). During the 1990s, the Tatar nationalists either utterly rejected the “Eurasian project” or accepted it with reservations. They stood for a true equality of ethnic groups and rejected anti-Westernism. Yet in the early 2000s, Tatarstan authorities began to support the Eurasian idea of a cultural synthesis and harmony- including the idea of the “Slavic-Turkic Union.” Khakim shifted in this direction as well: “The Tatars equally value secular and religious [spheres], European and Asiatic cultures; they see no barriers between West and East because the Tatar civilization is an open system that organically combines all of that” (Khakim 2004:44).

There are more radical views in Tatarstan as well. A leader of “Ittifak,” Fauziia Bairamova views Eurasia as the Tatar legacy alone: “Eurasia is ancient Tataria,” which was once united by the Chinggis Khan Empire and the Golden Horde. She believes that this concept of the past might encourage a current struggle for independence (Bairamova 2007).

Thus, there is great variability in Tatarstan both in the evaluation of Eurasianism and in the very understanding of its principles. The most influential scholars and politicians are reserved about these issues because they find a threat of authoritarianism contained within their discourse. They support modernization, democracy and rapprochement with Europe. Yet some of them want to view Tatarstan as a bridge between East and West and emphasize the special role of Kazan in the inter-civilizational dialogue. At the same time, they reject many other Eurasian ideas as “Russian imperialism.” There has also been a certain, evolving dynamic which moved

from a negative view of Eurasianism in the late 1990s to a positive evaluation of its moderate variety pre-adapted to Turkic interests in the beginning of the 2000s.

In Bashkortostan local intellectuals are displeased with the “Russian Idea” and the privileged position of Russian Orthodoxy. They are also irritated that certain Russian politicians and intellectuals construct a negative image of local leaders and minority peoples who aspire to maintain their cultural originality. At the same time, they reject a Eurocentric approach that negates the Asiatic side of Russia. Therefore, they put an emphasis on the Eurasian “double-faced” Russia, its “multi-ethnic, multi-confessional and multi-cultural nature” and want politicians to respect that perspective. Thus, the notions of “Eurasianism,” “common house,” and “Russian nation” prove to have the same content. Globalization is presented as the major threat to be resisted - a struggle that requires the cooperation of the Eurasian peoples and states. To put it differently, Eurasianism is a right to be different - a right that is challenged by the trend to homogeneity within the state and globalization in the international sphere. The unique location of the Republic of Bashkortostan situated “at the juncture of Europe and Asia” and connected with its future economic progress, has also been underlined (Rezoliutsiia 2002).

Thus, while discussing the Eurasian project, Turkic authors seek to provide their peoples with an equal position in the Russian society. The Tatar intellectuals go even further and want to win leadership of the Turkic world. To achieve that, they refer to the Turkic roots of the Russian political arrangement. Yet in this field they compete with their neighbors, in particular with the Bashkirs. At the same time, whereas some Turkic leaders appreciate authoritarian rule and empire, many Tatar intellectuals reject these Eurasian ideas and support modernization and democratic principles. Hence, the former share the anti-Western views of the Russian nationalists, while the latter orient themselves to Europe and its values. Their only common ground, which determines their positive attitude towards Eurasianism, is an aspiration to use it against assimilation and to articulate their right to be different. In this respect, Eurasianism proves to be one of the main anti-globalization ideologies in the region.

Security Eurasianism

In the Northern Caucasus intellectuals were alarmed by an increase in tensions between neighboring ethnic groups. As a result, some of them began to develop concepts stressing the unity and friendship of local peoples. In this context, Eurasianism was viewed as an ideology that might relax interethnic strife, arrest hostility and unify people. A project of the “Caucasian super-ethnos,” or “Caucasian civilization” that emphasized cultural unity and common roots had to meet this demand (Ktsoeva 1994; Abdulatipov 1995). It referred to the would-be common ethnicity of all the indigenous peoples of the Northern Caucasus. It also pointed to “common cultural-psychological features” as if those were characteristic of all native people regardless of their linguistic affiliation or religion. Caucasus was presented as the “second Eurasia,” an image meant to arrest separatism and to prevent the Northern Caucasus from breaking away from Russia (Davidovich 1998, 2000). At the same time, intellectuals were competing with each other

for a higher status of their own ethnic groups within the “Caucasian civilization” - some of them wanted to privilege the Adyghes, others – the Turks, still others – the Dagestanis or the Vainakhs.

Kabardian historian K. Kh. Unezhev called the Caucasus “the second [after Russia] Eurasian civilization.” He argued that, like Russia, the Caucasus was a cultural bridge between East and West, yet it had to be identified with neither Russia, nor East, nor West. Indeed, the “first Eurasia” was dominated by a particular ethnic body and was built up by force, but the second one was shaped “naturally,” without any aggression. The “first Eurasia” suffered from irreconcilable conflicts, while, within the second, various peoples developed similar traditions. He concluded that the “Caucasian Eurasianism was a cultural, geographical, economic and historic unity.” As a result, he claimed that, in fact, the Caucasus, rather than Russia, was the “first Eurasia” (Unezhev 1997:18-19). Moreover, Unezhev wanted to provide the Adyghes with a special place within the “Caucasian civilization.” He argued that they have both shaped a “particular cultural type” based on the Adyghes etiquette and also invented their own ancient writing system (Unezhev 1997:21, 29-30).

Some other authors depict the Caucasus as a special civilization, a natural bridge between the Muslim and the Christian worlds. It is the Caucasus that is fated to effectively hold back the tides of “Atlantic civilization” (Usmanov 1997:378-379). Thus, the Caucasian Eurasianism also manifests anti-Westernist and anti-Atlanticist tendencies.

Hence, the project of “Caucasian Eurasianism” was aimed mostly at peace-keeping as its advocates believed that cultural unity might provide a basis for social cohesion, thus relaxing internal discords. Additionally, it manifested an anti-globalist stance and an aspiration to secure “authentic” cultures and identities. Collective peoples’ rights were valued over those of the individual. At the same time, the Caucasus was opposed to the idea of Russia as possessing a more prestigious civilization. Yet the project proved unable to relax tensions and hostility in the Caucasus in either symbolical or practical terms. Moreover, the project was used, on the one hand, for the consolidation of culturally related peoples, yet on the other, for their isolation from other North Caucasians and for constructing a hierarchy of peoples according to their alleged “status.”

“Turkic peril” and Tajik-Armenian response

As we already know, the Turkic factor plays an important role in many neo-Eurasian projects. This is no accident as Turkic peoples have good historical reasons to claim Eurasia. This was strengthened by their fast demographic growth noted already during the 1970s and 1980s. During the late 1980s, the People’s Front of Azerbaijan treated the USSR as a Muslim-Christian and Turkic-Slavic union. It applauded the breaking away of the Baltic republics because that increased Muslim and Turkic influence in society. The leaders of the movement viewed the Turkic-Slavic alliance as a transitory period, which would lead to the domination of the Turks and Muslims in the state (Kherischi 1990).

The Assembly of the Turkic Peoples organized a conference in Almaty in December 1991 where participants from Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Tatarstan supported the construction of a unified Turkistan (“Great Turan”) in the former USSR’s territory. Some Tatar journalists reminded the audience that for centuries this territory provided a space for large states where various languages (Turkic, Persian, and Russian) dominated in different periods. They believed that this needed to continue and that the Western view of the “nation” was inappropriate here. They were happy to say “good-bye” to the Baltic Republics, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and the South Caucasus, whose departure demarcated the borders of the coming Turkic-Russian Eurasia (Dzhanguzhin, Musaliev 1992). Yet those plans did not materialize.

Armenian and Tajik intellectuals were alarmed by the idea of the Slavic-Turkic union. In Armenia they assumed that the “Eurasian Union” would be dominated by the “Asian element” because the European breakaway republics declined to enter it. Some Armenian authors believed in a pan-Turkic conspiracy that masked a Turan with Eurasian face. As a result, some authors suggested restoring a “Christian Alliance” rather than a Eurasian one. Others pointed to close relationships between the “Aryan peoples,” which paved the way for a rapprochement with Iran despite the religious differences between Armenia and Iran. At the same time, those authors did not fail to represent Armenia as neither a European, nor an Eastern nation, but as a bridge between West and East (Muradyan, Manukyan 1997). Thus, a nationalization of the Eurasian idea took place here as well.

Certain Muscovite scholars of Tajik backgrounds were also alarmed by the idea of the Slavic-Turkic alliance. They pointed to ancient relationships between the Slavs and the “Aryan-Iranian world,” where the Tajik ethnogenesis was rooted, and suggested revising the view of Eurasia in accordance with this understanding. For them, Asia should be identified with the East-Iranian world rather than with the Turks. They argued that this strategy might strengthen Russia whereas an alliance with the Turks would doom her to degenerate into provincialism (Shukurov and Shukurov 1996). This approach is shared by the renowned Tajik academician N. Negmatov, who identifies the “Eurasian values” with “Iranian-Slavic ones” and calls for an Iranian-Slavic alliance. His Eurasianism is based on an Indo-European foundation that lacks any involvement with the Turks (Negmatov 1997:324-327). However, Eurasianism is less popular in contemporary Tajikistan. Instead, Tajiks discuss the idea of “Aryan civilization,” which serves to improve their relationships with Iran, Pakistan and India (Bakhovadinov and Dodikhudoev 2005:148-149).

Tensions between Armenians and Tajiks, on the one hand, and their Turkic neighbors, on the other, rooted in Soviet times, have led to open hostility. Therefore, Armenian and Tajik intellectuals are constructing alliances in their own way, which ironically blend Eurasianism with “Aryanism.” Yet, while seeking alliances with Iran, Armenians downplay the religious aspects of such an alliance, while, in contrast, some Tajiks stress the “Islamic-Aryan civilization.” The Armenian and Tajik “Eurasianism” focuses on the idea of security, understood as defense from the “Turkic assault.”

Conclusions

Thus, an analysis of the expansion of Eurasianism to various ethno-national environments leads us to the following conclusions. First, one can distinguish between different kinds of Eurasianism within almost every single ethno-national community. Some of them are more radical and others are more moderate. For example, the moderate variety is cultivated and exploited by the policy-makers, who usually demonstrate a more pragmatic approach. By contrast, political outsiders and, partly, public intellectuals develop more radical ideas.

Second, Eurasianism is by no means constructed as a consistent ideology. Usually people make their choice and select what aspects of Eurasianism they consider more appropriate for their goals. Thus, non-Russian ethnic groups mostly appreciate the democratic elements of the Eurasian project, namely a political equality of ethnic groups regardless of their size and political leverage, and also a combination of modernization with the maintenance of native languages, cultures, and identity. Here, an idea of any privileges for the Russian Orthodoxy is entirely rejected.

Third, a regional variability expresses itself in the specific elements chosen as useful Eurasian heritage: economic cooperation and integration in certain CIS countries; an ethno-political equality – in the Middle Volga region and Siberia; an inter-ethnic peace – in the Northern Caucasus; and security – in Armenia and Tajikistan. Hence, “economic Eurasianism” dominates in some new post-Soviet states (in Central Asia and, until recently, in Ukraine) where people appreciate modernization based on Western technologies, provided it does not spoil local authenticity. Turkic ethnic groups in the Russian hinterland mostly value “political Eurasianism.” Those in the Northern Caucasus, Armenia and Tajikistan are developing an “Eurasianism of security.” For their part, certain Azerbaijani scholars are constructing “geopolitical Eurasianism” to provide their country with prestige in the world community. Finally, many professionals (especially in the arts and literature) appreciate a form of “cultural Eurasianism” aimed at the maintenance of a common cultural space that was shaped during Soviet times.

Fourth, there is regional variability in the understanding of democracy. Members of the elite in Bashkortostan, Sakha-Yakutia, Altai and the Northern Caucasus emphasize collective ethnic rights, while in Tatarstan human rights have higher priority. Respectively, empire is viewed by the former as a “symphony of peoples” and by the latter as a strict authoritarian structure.

Fifth, in some regions an evolution of the attitude towards Eurasianism is observed: a shift from earlier suspicions or complete rejection to later assimilation of its moderate version adapted to given ethno-national environments (in Tatarstan).

Sixth, despite Eurasian declarations of ethno-cultural equality, in some regions (Northern Caucasus, Middle Volga region, the Southern Urals) there is a symbolic struggle for leadership in the Eurasian community of peoples. Moreover, the Eurasian idea is used by some Turkic leaders to claim political domination in Eurasia or its particular regions. For example, there is a

competition between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan for the symbolic place as the “bridge between Europe and Asia.” Some Tatar intellectuals want to provide the Tatars with a hegemonic position within the Eurasian space as the “main link within the Turkic world.”

Seventh, there is a struggle for membership in the alliance with the Slavs (Russians); an idea of Slavic-Turkic alliance is popular among the Turks, yet the Armenians and the Tajiks are oriented to an alliance on anti-Turkic bases.

Furthermore, Eurasianism is sometimes used as a psychological escape - it helps the Central Asian states distance themselves from the negative image of Asia and to identify themselves with the West and its values (modernization, literacy, secularism). Yet, everywhere (with the exception of Tatarstan) this by no means arrests the development of anti-globalist and anti-western stances that are embedded in the Eurasian ideology.

Finally, what seems especially attractive in Eurasianism is that it lets one claim the position of a bridge that unites and reconciles different cultural worlds. In this context, the former periphery obtains a prestigious centrality, and a border draws people closer to each other rather than dividing them. As Caroline Humphrey notes, “Eurasia offers above all an escape from their peripherality, obscurity and insignificance” (Humphrey 2002). Paradoxically, contrary to what the original ideologues of Eurasianism expected, contemporary Eurasianism is on good terms with local nationalisms that modify it in various ways for their own goals.

Notes

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