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Aleksandr Kubyshkin and
Aleksandr Sergunin

The Problem of the "Special Path" in Russian Foreign Policy

(From the 1990s to the Early Twenty-First Century)

The authors compare three ideologies of a "special path" in early post-Soviet Russia: neo-Eurasianism, geopolitics, and a new, hybrid version.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Russia as a new political and state community without clearly defined social ideals or developmental reference points has revived interest in the idea of a "special path" for Russia—an idea that has arisen periodically in Russian sociopolitical discourse since the nineteenth

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Aleksandr Ivanovich Kubyshkin, Doctor of History, is professor in the Department of American Research, Faculty of International Relations, St. Petersburg State University. Aleksandr Anatol′evich Sergunin, Doctor of Political Science and Candidate of History, is professor in the Department of the Theory and History of International Relations, Faculty of International Relations, St. Petersburg State University.

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century. Over the last two decades, a number of tendencies (schools) have actively engaged with this theme, each proposing its own approach to the structure of Russian foreign policy and explaining Russia's place in world civilization in its own way.[1]

The first tendency that tried more or less systematically to outline a "special path" for Russia in world politics was *neo-Eurasianism*. To a substantial degree, this tendency arose in reaction to the Russian variant of Atlanticism that dominated the foreign policy of the new Russia during the early years of the Yeltsin presidency, with its unambiguous orientation toward all-round cooperation with the West (above all, the United States).

The basic postulates of the foreign policy of the Atlanticists can be expressed in a set of formulas:

—national interests do not play a decisive role in foreign policy or in world politics as a whole;

—the crucial role in international politics is played by international law and international organizations;

—the West is Russia's natural partner, and hence Russia cannot accept the concept of a multipolar world; and

—the main threats to Russia come not from the West but from the East.

But when it became clear that the West was in no hurry to accept Russia into its economic and military-political organizations, did not regard Moscow as a real partner (either an equal or a junior one), and ignored Russia in resolving the most important issues of world policy (the crisis in the Balkans in the 1990s became a benchmark), a search began within the Russian political elite for concepts that would offer an alternative to Atlanticism. One of these alternatives came to be neo-Eurasianism—a unique mixture of geopolitics with the so-called civilizational approach.

Despite numerous theoretical and political disagreements among themselves, the neo-Eurasianists were on the whole unanimous in attributing a special historical mission to Russia. By virtue of its geopolitical (Eurasian) position and special historical–cultural development, Russia, in the neo-Eurasianists' opinion, was doomed to be a bridge between civilizations—Eastern and Western.[2] Russia combines within itself features of both civilizations; under

contemporary conditions, therefore, it naturally assumes the role of intermediary even as it guarantees Eurasian stability.

Let us note, however, that some neo-Eurasianists, mainly those belonging to the Slavophile tradition (El′giz Pozdniakov, Aleksandr Dugin), believe that Russia is not just a bridge between East and West but a special ("third") civilization, developing along its own unique path.

The neo-Eurasianists regarded Russia's unambiguous orientation toward the West during the period of Atlanticist dominance as a strategic error and argued that Moscow must develop its foreign policy in both geopolitical directions. The neo-Eurasianists agreed with the liberals that the East posed quite a few threats to Russia and that the country should therefore pay the closest attention to this region in terms of national security. Unlike the Atlanticists, however, they saw in the East not only a threat but also an opportunity for Russia to play its role in the world and obtain numerous economic, military–political, cultural, and other advantages from cooperation with this region. The neo-Eurasianists emphasized that Russia had long-established ties with many of the newly formed states of the Caucasus and Central Asia and that their economies and societies were closely interwoven. Given that the developed countries of the West were in no hurry to welcome Russia into their own community, it would be irrational to lose traditional ties with the former Soviet republics and with the developing countries of Asia and Africa. Moreover, the East includes not only underdeveloped countries but also the so-called newly industrialized countries (South Korea, Taiwan, the Association for Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN] countries) and such economic giants as Japan and China.

The neo-Eurasianists were among the first to assert that Russia must make the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) its top geopolitical priority.[3] They welcomed the creation both of the CIS itself and of its military–political structures, including the Tashkent Collective Security Treaty of 1992 and subsequent agreements. They criticized the Yeltsin–Kozyrev team for not paying enough attention to this organization and for not developing military and technical cooperation within the CIS rapidly enough. They also tried to draw the attention of both politicians and the public to the

situation of the Russian-speaking population in the post-Soviet space, demanding that Russian leaders protect Russian compatriots abroad.[4]

Another indubitable merit of the neo-Eurasianists was that they were among the first to introduce into circulation and try to decode such basic concepts of international relations theory as "national interests" and "national security." The preceding schools, including the Atlanticists, had not devoted proper attention to these categories.

At the same time, the neo-Eurasianist interpretation of these concepts was often unscientific and had a coating of romanticism. Thus, one of the founding fathers of neo-Eurasianism, S.B. Stankevich (then a presidential adviser on political questions), quite rightly supposed that a country's geographical position, history, culture, ethnic composition, and political traditions determine its national interests and that one may draw a distinction between permanent and temporary national interests. But he also tried to link this interpretation of national interests—traditional in international relations theory—with the different and not altogether scientific concept of the "national idea." In one of his works Stankevich states: "Between permanent and temporary basic interests lies a set of interests that reflect what may be called the 'national idea.' The national idea is the self-identification of a nation. This is a very emotional theme, a theme that touches on the changing course of national history. It is not a scientifically substantiated system of values but an aggregate of ideas about a nation's past and future."[5] It is not altogether clear why the national idea lies between permanent and temporary interests and why it cannot incorporate both. It is also not clear why Stankevich draws a distinction between the identity of a nation and its system of values, although in reality they are intertwined. Why are values always "scientifically substantiated"? Why can they not be the result of a nation's long-term historical and cultural development (including emotional perceptions of its past and future)?

Also rather abstract is Stankevich's characterization of the Russian "national idea" itself, which incorporates democracy, federalism, and patriotism. This characterization raises a question: what specifically is "Eurasian" about Russia? The United States,

Germany, Canada, India, and many other countries that share democratic principles and have a federal system can make equally valid claims to be bridges between civilizations.

At the same time, one cannot but agree with the neo-Eurasianists when they link (here, too, they were among the first to make this connection) the domestic and foreign aspects of national security and emphasize that the key to national security lies primarily within Russia itself—namely, in ensuring its internal stability.[6]

As already noted, the neo-Eurasianists disagreed with one another on several serious issues of worldview and tactics. It is tentatively possible to distinguish two main groups that were at times in quite sharp conflict—democratic (or moderate) and Slavophile (or radical).

The *democratic neo-Eurasianists* were at one time close to the Yeltsin administration and occupied a number of influential posts in various government departments and public organizations. For some time, the ideas of neo-Eurasianism were also quite popular in academic circles.

Unlike the Slavophiles, the democratic neo-Eurasianists did not oppose cooperation with the West, provided that it was based on the principle of equal rights and did not harm Russia's interests in the East. As one supporter of neo-Eurasianism put it, "partnership with the West will undoubtedly strengthen Russia in its relations with the East and South, while partnership with the East and South will give Russia independence in its relations with the West."[7] In Stankevich's opinion, it is high time for Russia to overcome the historical dilemma of choosing between East and West in its foreign policy and to develop cooperation in both directions.[8]

The democratic neo-Eurasianists exerted influence not only on the course of public debate in the mid-1990s but also on the doctrinal foundations of Russian foreign policy. Thus, the first post-Soviet foreign policy conception of the Russian Federation (1993) bears clear traces of neo-Eurasianist influence. This is especially true of the sections devoted to Russia's geopolitical priorities: relations with the CIS occupy first place; the Asia–Pacific Region and the Middle East are also mentioned among the most important regions.[9]

Unlike the democratic version of neo-Eurasianism, the *Slavophile* version stressed not so much the geographical as the civilizational specificity of Russia. As Pozdniakov, one of the leaders of this group, put it, the "geopolitical position of Russia is not just unique (this is true of any state); it determines the destiny of both Russia itself and the whole world. . . . An important aspect of this situation is that Russia, being situated between civilizations, has always been a natural keeper of civilizational equilibrium and the world balance of forces."[10] To fulfill this historical mission, Russia must have a strong state and conduct a foreign policy that closely corresponds to its national interests.

The Slavophile neo-Eurasianists believe that Russia should not consider becoming part of either the Eastern or the Western civilizations. It must follow its own path. In the words of Pozdniakov: "if Russia wants to preserve its great future, it must remain Russia. It has no reason to set itself the goal of becoming or joining Europe. This aim is as absurd and unreal as it would be to aim at joining China, India, or Japan."[11] The Slavophiles argue that Russia must rely only on its own strength (especially in view of its wealth of human and material resources) in its domestic and foreign policy. For this reason, they object to Western aid and to excessively close ties with any (especially a Western) international organization that may limit Russia's freedom to maneuver in foreign policy.

For several reasons, by the mid-1990s neo-Eurasianism (in both variants) entered a crisis and almost disappeared from Russia's political and intellectual horizons.[12] Most of the neo-Eurasianists (especially the democrats) moved into the camp called political realism, while the Slavophiles ended up in the geopolitical school.[13]

Russian adepts of *geopolitics* (Pozdniakov, Dugin, A.A. Nartov, etc.) took the baton from the neo-Eurasianists in debates about the "special path" and Russian uniqueness.[14] It is ironic but true that they take their inspiration not from indigenous Russian thinkers (like those who inspired the neo-Eurasianists) but, increasingly, from Western geopolitical theorists (Alfred Thayer Mahan, Halford Mackinder, Karl Haushofer, Nicholas J. Spykman, and others).

Russian geopolitical writers have paid special attention to Mackinder's theory of the Heartland, because this theory assigns

a key role to Russia, which has traditionally controlled most of the Heartland. As is well known, Mackinder formulated the essence of his theory in three celebrated maxims: "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island controls the world."[15] Guided by this theory, Mackinder thought that the sea powers should not allow continental powers to control the Heartland. In practice, this approach led to constant wars and to the redivision of spheres of influence. Russia, occupying a central place in this geopolitical construction, has been drawn willy-nilly into global competition.

Because Russia has paid a high price for these geopolitical "games" over the last three centuries, contemporary Russian writers on geopolitics have proposed a world order that would halt the futile and expensive competition and turn the Heartland into a means of stabilizing the system of international relations. Of course, this view assigns to Russia a central place in maintaining security in the region and throughout the world. Developing Mackinder's theory, Pozdniakov has proposed his own formulation of the geopolitical maxim that at the same time describes a system of global security: "Who controls the Heartland has a means of effective control over world politics, and above all a means of maintaining the geopolitical and power balance in the world. Without such a balance, a stable world is unthinkable."[16]

Russian geopolitical writers believe that the West has committed a grave error by shifting the geopolitical boundary eastward and fragmenting the Heartland. Pozdniakov emphasizes that the Heartland cannot maintain the equilibrium of international security if it is fragmented. If that happens, the Heartland will itself be in a state of imbalance and chaos that may spread to the rest of the world. In the words of the Russian theorist, "from this flows Russia's geopolitical role and task as the center of the Heartland; here lie the sources of its fundamental interests as a nation-state."[17]

For all the superficial appeal of geopolitical theories, they have serious, intrinsic methodological defects; moreover, they are often far removed from reality. Thus, the theory of the Heartland—dear to many generations of geopolitical writers—arose at the be-

ginning of the twentieth century in response to the geographic, economic, scientific–technological, communications, military, and political–ideological conditions prevailing at that time; even refurbished, it hardly suits current realities. It bears mention that the concept of the Heartland arose in a territory that was, above all, strategically invulnerable to strikes inflicted by the sea powers. But in an era of missile and space weaponry, and given modern means of transportation and communication, nothing and no one can be considered invulnerable.

The fact that Eurasia (especially Europe) was for the most of the twentieth century the focus of world politics, the place where the interests of the great powers clashed, does not mean that this region will always retain its strategic significance. Spykman (an American follower of Mackinder), who created his own theory of the future world order at the height of World War II, thought that after the war the geopolitical "break" would pass not so much through the Heartland as along the perimeter of Eurasia—through the Rimland.[18] His compatriot Robert Strausz-Hupé insisted that North America (above all, the United States) was the key geostrategic region that stabilized the global balance of power.[19] Saul Bernard Cohen, another U.S. geopolitical theorist, identified not one or two but several strategically significant regions and even tried to differentiate them further.[20]

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the world socialist system and the end of the cold war, the geopolitical priorities of world politics changed again: the leading world powers are increasingly losing interest in Russia and the Heartland in Mackinder's sense and turning their gaze toward the dynamically developing states of East Asia and the Asia–Pacific Region as a whole, as well as toward regions that emanate instability—the Middle East and Central and South Asia.

The customary geopolitical division of the world into "sea" and "land" (continental) powers that for some reason are doomed to eternal war with one another seems contrived to me.

In general, the distinction between sea and land has lost its former significance, while another factor has come to the fore—global means of communication and the problems associated with them.

States in the contemporary world compete primarily in the realm of high technology (especially information technology); they do not compete for primitive control over geographic space.

In the 2000s, a *hybrid* version of Russian "autonomy" emerged in the Russian literature on problems of Russia's foreign policy and domestic development.[21] This hybrid incorporated the intellectual baggage of neo-Eurasianism and geopolitics while adding certain new elements. From neo-Eurasianism the new theory of Russia's "special path" took the perception of our country as a special civilization with a worldwide cultural–historical mission and equally important interests in the West and in the East (and, of course, the view that Russia's own interests must predominate and Russia not be absorbed into other civilizations).

From geopolitics the "hybrid" borrowed the idea of the eternal striving of the West (and other "poles of power") to humiliate and dismember Russia. It is Moscow's task to repel the latest assault by foreign enemies and restore the geopolitical balance on terms favorable to Russia.

Let us add that the adepts of dynamic conservatism also inherited from classical Eurasianism many ideological assumptions and clichés about the need to create supranational (suprastate) institutions, the need to introduce the strictest, most detailed regulation of all aspects of political, economic, social, and cultural life (extending even to the activity of circuses!), the struggle against the unconditionally hostile policy toward Russia exhibited by the West in general and the United States in particular, and so on.

As for the new elements in the hybrid version of the "special path" doctrine, its supporters began to place greater emphasis on the need for spiritual renewal—above all, of the Russian ethnic group (and other Slavic peoples)—based on the values of Orthodox Christianity. This concept cannot be dismissed as a crude version of nationalism, because in the final analysis this school of political thought seeks the prosperity of all Russia's peoples and the formation of a supraethnic state identity (the only kind of state identity possible in a multiethnic and multifaith country). These authors emphasize that because the Russian ethnic group has suffered most from the dislocation of recent decades, renewal must begin there,

with that ethnic group becoming a sort of "locomotive" pulling the development of the state as a whole.

Another new element is that the predecessors of today's advocates of uniqueness (both neo-Eurasianists and theorists of geopolitics) for the most part confined themselves to academic philosophizing and abstract appeals to politicians, who as a rule remained deaf to these appeals. By contrast, the new generation of supporters of the hybrid view—as they pass through the school of practical work in various spheres of state, political, and public activity (business, the executive and legislative branches of power, state service, the mass media, nongovernmental organizations, etc.)—have already gone beyond good intentions to propose quite concrete programs of action. An example is the so-called Sergiev Project and its "Russian doctrine," which uses extensive if eclectic historical material to describe in depth the causes of the collapse of the Soviet project, analyzes the current situation, and presents a detailed program for bringing the country out of crisis and strengthening its position in the world—the so-called Fifth Project.[22]

Let us emphasize that this generation of supporters of the "special path" are betting on modern "social engineering" techniques—the network principle of control and interaction, strategies of goal setting and manipulation of mass consciousness, information technologies, and so on.[23] Like the current Russian leadership, they consider that successful reform in Russia requires the active introduction of innovative technologies—not only in the economy but also in the system of social control. In contrast to the official approach, supporters of this school hold that the management of innovation projects must not be left in the hands of corrupt and often incompetent bureaucrats: managers with good reputations should be recruited from the private sector and subjected to strict public oversight.

In this sense, the current version of the concept of Russia's "special path" is not just the latest variant of the theory of conservative elitism but also a serious attempt if not to dominate Russian public and political discourse, then at least to turn from a marginal into a quite influential school that it will no longer be so easy to shrug aside. As several prominent Russian experts (most of whom,

incidentally, do not themselves advocate this view) emphasize, it would be a great error simply to declare ideas about a "special path" prejudices or vestiges of former "imperial times."[24] Behind these views stand traditions and stereotypes that are firmly rooted in our public consciousness and that must not be oversimplified or ignored. It is therefore necessary to take such attitudes seriously, study them, and ponder how to guide them into a more constructive channel.

Notes

1. For a more detailed account of discussions on this theme in the 1990s, see A.A. Sergunin, *Rossiiskaia vneshnepoliticheskaia mysl′: problemy natsional′noi i mezhdunarodnoi bezopasnosti* (Nizhnii Novgorod: Izdatel′stvo Nizhegorodskogo gosudarstvennogo lingvisticheskogo universiteta, 2003),

2. S. Stankevich, "Derzhava v poiskakh sebia," *Nezavisimaia gazeta,* 28 March 1992, p. 4; Stankevich, "Russia in Search of Itself," *The National Interest* (Summer 1992), pp. 47–51.

3. N. Travkin, "Russia, Ukraine, and Eastern Europe," in *Rethinking Russia's National Interests,* ed. S. Sestanovich (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1994), pp. 34–35.

4. Ibid.; K. Pleshakov, "Russia's Mission: The Third Epoch," *International Affairs* (Moscow) (January 1993), pp. 22–23.

5. S. Stankevich, "Toward a New 'National Idea,'" in *Rethinking Russia's National Interests,* p. 24.

6. Ibid., p. 28.

7. Quoted from Neil Malcolm, "New Thinking and After: Debate in Moscow about Europe," in his edited *Russia and Europe: An End to Confrontation?* (London: Pinter Publishers for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1994), p. 167.

8. Stankevich, "Toward a New 'National Idea,'" pp. 25–26.

9. "Kontseptsiia vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii," *Diplomaticheskii vestnik* (January 1993), pp. 3–23.

10. E. Pozdnyakov [Pozdniakov], "Russia Is a Great Power," *International Affairs* (Moscow) (January 1993), p. 6.

11. E.A. Pozdniakov, *Filosofiia politiki* (Moscow: Paleia, 1994), vol. 2, p. 102.

12. For a more detailed discussion of the causes of the crisis of neo-Eurasianism, see Sergunin, *Rossiiskaia vneshnepoliticheskaia mysl′,* pp. 28–31.

13. The Slavophile tendency has not, however, disappeared. To some extent, it has transformed itself, emphasizing the positioning of Russia not so much as a Eurasian as an "Orthodox civilization"—the sole and real defender of Orthodox values throughout the world. The works of N.A. Narochnitskaia belong to this tendency. See, for example, N.A. Narochnitskaia, *Rossiia i russkie v sovremennom mire* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2009).

14. Pozdniakov, *Filosofiia;* A.G. Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki* (Moscow, 1997); Dugin and A.A. Nartov, *Geopolitika* (Moscow, 1999).

15. H.J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (New York: Henry Holt, 1919), p. 186.

16. Pozdniakov, *Filosofiia*, vol. 2, p. 282.

17. Ibid.

18. N.J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1944), p. 43.

19. R. Strausz-Hupé, *Geopolitics: The Struggle for Space and Power* (New York: George Putnam's Sons, 1942), p. 195.

20. S.B. Cohen, "Geopolitics in the New World Era: A New Perspective on an Old Discipline," in *Reordering the World: Geopolitical Perspectives on the Twenty-First Century,* ed. George J. Demko and William B. Wood (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994), p. 28.

21. Some representatives of this school prefer to call their doctrine "dynamic conservatism" (A.B. Kobiakov and V.V. Aver′ianov, eds., *Russkaia doktrina* [Moscow: Iauza-press, 2008], p. 842).

22. Ibid.

23. Contemporary supporters of the "special path" have their own Web sites, blogs, Internet publications, and so on. In September 2009, there was a sensation over an open letter sent directly by e-mail to President Dmitry Medvedev by one of the leaders of this school, Maksim Kalashnikov (Vladimir Kucherenko), in which he proposed a number of initiatives to develop Russia's potential for innovation (http://m-kalashnikov.livejournal.com/141905.html [Web site address accessed 26 September 2012—Ed.]).

24. V. Pantin and I. Semenenko, "Transformatsiia natsional′no-tsivilizatsionnoi identichnosti sovremennogo rossiiskogo obshchestva," in *Poisk natsional′no-tsivilizatsionnoi identichnosti i kontsept "osobogo puti" v rossiiskom massovom soznanii v kontekste modernizatsii* (Moscow), p. 39; S.V. Kortunov, *Sovremennaia vneshniaia politika Rossii: strategiia izbiratel′noi vovlechennosti* (Moscow: Izdatel′skii dom GU—VShE, 2009), p. 92.

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