საქართველოს მეცნიერებათა ეროვნული აკადემიის მოამბე, ტ. 4, №1, 2010
BULLETIN OF THE GEORGIAN NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, vol. 4, no. 1, 2010

Political Sciences

Central Caucaso-Asia: from Imperial to Democratic Geopolitics

Vladimer Papava

Academy Member, P. Gugushvili Institute of Economics, Tbilisi

ABSTRACT. This paper deals with the rethinking of post-Soviet Central Eurasia. According to the approach, which arises from a Eurasianist conception of the region, drawing mainly on geography, equates Russia with Eurasia, an idea that has become popular and much debated in the post-Soviet period. If we proceed from the fact that the eight countries discussed here form two sub-regions – the Central Caucasus and Central Asia – the larger region, which includes both sub-regions, should be called the Central Caucaso-Asia. The term "Central Caucaso-Asia" reflects a conceptual idea of the interests of strengthening the local countries' state sovereignty, which, in principle, contradicts the spirit and idea of Russo-centric Eurasianism. *© 2010 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.*

Key words: *Post-Soviet Central Eurasia, Central Caucaso-Asia, the Central Caucasus, Central Asia, Eurasianism.*

The term "Central Eurasia" is normally applied to Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, which are treated as a single geopolitical area. I am convinced that this is not completely correct from the geopolitical viewpoint since it still reflects the Russian idea of this geopolitical expanse.

The Eurasian continent consists of two parts of the world – Europe and Asia; for obvious reasons its geographic dimension can be used (and is used) in geopolitical contexts as well. There is another, no less popular, geopolitical idea about Eurasia created by the fact that in the post-Soviet period Russia has been looking for its national and territorial identity. Indeed, for the first time in the last 200 years, Russia has found itself on a much smaller territory. This prompted the search for a conception that would justify its special role at least across the post-Soviet expanse [1]. No wonder the questions – what is Russia? and where is Russia? – remain topical [2: 56, 64]. It should be said that the so-called myths [3] and narratives [4: 23] about the homeland were largely encouraged by the talks about revising the Russian Federation (RF) state borders, which are much more popular in the intellectual and political communities of Russia and among the Russian public than is believed in Western academic writings [3: 294].

In their search for a solution to the problem outlined above, the RF political leaders can rely on the ideas of Eurasianism that acquired their second wind in the post-Soviet period [5]. Based mainly on geography [6: 14], they still presuppose a geopolitical revision of the Eurasian continent as a geographical unit [7: 222].

We all know that geographically the Old World consists of several parts of the world – Europe, Asia (the so-called Eurasian continent) and Africa – while the term "Eurasia" as applied by the Russian geopolitical school narrows down the territorial limits of Eurasia as a geographical continent.

According to the Eurasianists, Russia is a special continent [8]. To resolve the terminological conflict between the geographic and geopolitical interpretations of Eurasia, the geopolitical context uses the terms "Eurasia-Russia" [9: 133-135, 137], "Russia-Eurasia" [10: 83-84], or "Eurasian Rus" [11: 312-364, 539-543]. The problem became topical again in the post-Soviet period: before that geographers used the term "Eurasia" in its geo-

graphical meaning [12: 222]. Here it should be said that the discussion of a possible compromise between the correct geographical term for Eurasia and the territory of Russia's domination is still going on [12: 221].

Since the Russian geopolitical school relies on its own interpretation of Eurasia to justify Russia's imperial ambitions, the term "Central Eurasia" needs specification: to what extent do its geographic and geopolitical interpretations coincide and what problems do they entail?

Traditionally, Central Eurasia as a geographic concept is related to the territory between the Bosporus in the west and the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region in the east and from the Kazakh steppes in the north to the Indian Ocean in the south [13: 11]. This means that geographic Central Eurasia almost completely covers geographic Central Asia, but not Central Europe because Asia is much larger than Europe. For this reason Central Europe is left outside the conventional center (Central Eurasia) of the single continent called Eurasia. If, however, the physical dimensions of the continent's parts are put aside, logic suggests that *geographic Eurasia as a continent consists of two parts of the world (Europe and Asia). This means that geographically Central Eurasia should consist of both Central Europe and Central Asia and the Caucasian region as two links that connect them* [14: 30-42; 15-17]. It seems that the geographic interpretation of the Central Eurasian concept is still dominated by its geopolitical interpretation, which equates Russia and Eurasia even in the post-Soviet era [12: 217].

Those who limit Central Eurasia to Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are still under the spell of Soviet approaches which leave vast territories, in particular Afghanistan, Northern Iran, the Northern Caucasus, Northwestern China, Cashmere, and the Tibetan Plateau, which share historical, ethnic, and cultural roots with the above countries beyond the region [13: 11-12].

While the Russian Eurasian school narrows down the scale of Eurasia as a geographic continent, the differences are less important in the case of Central Eurasia since the Russian geopolitical school is in control of geography.

Today academic circles (and not only them) are showing a great interest in studying the problems of the three Central Caucasian countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) [18: 287; 19: 9] and the five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) within the same context. The vast region represented by these eight states is now called Central Eurasia [20: 2-3; 21: 206; 22: 117]. The same term is also applied to the same eight countries and Afghanistan [23]. Together with the five Central Asian states, it belongs to Greater Central Asia [24: 874; 25: 16; 26].

If we proceed from the fact that the eight republics discussed here form two sub-regions – the Central Caucasus and Central Asia – the larger region, which includes both sub-regions, can be called the *Central Caucaso-Asia* (in Russian, *Kavkazia*) [14-16]: *this preserves the term "Central" as the key one for both regions, while the new term "Caucaso-Asia" is derived from two related terms "Caucasus" and "Asia."* If the term is applied to nine countries (the original eight and Afghanistan), the region should be called *Greater Central Caucaso-Asia*. This conception is already shared by others [27: 69].

We should not forget that Central Caucaso-Asia as a single region is not integrated because it has no political or cultural homogeneity [13: 13]. At the same time, its component parts have much in common, which makes it possible to regard them as a single region [23].

All the countries of Central Caucaso-Asia began their post-Soviet lives under more or less identical conditions, without the very much needed institutions of statehood, with a fairly low level of political culture, and a command-(read: communist-)type economy. These problems were reflected, to different extents, in the political and economic transformations in the Central Caucaso-Asian countries. Significantly, all these countries, with the exception of Kazakhstan, demonstrated a reverse dependence between rich hydrocarbon reserves and the pace of market reforms: the reserves obviously failed to stimulate economic reforms [28].

The Central Caucaso-Asia, to say nothing of the Greater Central Caucaso-Asia, has several conflict subregions on its territory [13], something that interferes, to various degrees, with economic progress in some of the countries; it also prevents the local countries from using local resources to move together in the desired direction.

The region's rich hydrocarbon resources attract investments and tempt regional and world powers to politically dominate there [29]. Today, when energy policy is blending with the foreign policy of these powers, this is not merely understandable, but also inevitable [30]. At the same time, the Russian factor [31] is still very strong in the Central Asian countries' energy policies: it seems that this part of the Soviet heritage cannot be eliminated soon.

The Central Caucasus and Central Asia are *mutually complementary*, which means that they can use their resources together: the West is interested in Central Asian

oil and gas, while the Central Caucasus not only wants to move its own oil and gas to the West, but also to use the energy (and not only) transportation corridor that connects the East and the West. This means that the Central Caucasus can serve as a bridge between Central Asia, a geopolitically closed region, and the West [32: 132].

It should be said in this context that, according to Zbigniew Brzezinski, Azerbaijan is the most important geopolitical pivot among all the others across the geographic continent of Eurasia [33: 41]. The "geopolitical pivot" status is determined by the country's geographic location and its potential vulnerability to what the active geostrategic players might undertake in relation to it [33: 40]. By "active geostrategic players" I mean the states strong and determined enough to spread their domination beyond their limits.

By describing Azerbaijan as the "cork in the bottle" filled with the riches of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia, Mr. Brzezinski stresses: "The independence of the Central Asian states can be rendered nearly meaningless if Azerbaijan becomes fully subordinated to Moscow's control" [33: 46-47, 129]. Kazakhstan is another of America's target countries in Central Caucaso-Asia, which is amply illustrated by the Americans' intention to maximize their investments there [34: 105].

The idea of post-Soviet state independence and its strengthening as the linchpin of state interests of the Central Caucaso-Asian states rule out their acceptance of not only Eurasianism, but also of the Heartland theory. They both assert their subordination to the imperial schemes of Russia and the West. In both cases, the interests of those countries which these imperial ambitions apply to, are left out of the picture. It is this, in our opinion, that shows the one-sidedness and, consequently, the limitations of both geopolitical constructs—the Heartland theory and Eurasianism. These geopolitical constructs fully blend into a so-called "imperial geopolitics" which explains somehow the relevance of elaborations on a so-called "democratic geopolitics" today [35: 22].

The leaders of those Central Caucaso-Asian countries who are seeking a tighter grip on power rather than stronger and developed state sovereignty, to say nothing of democratization, human rights, and a market economy, are prepared to embrace any theory (or rather pseudo-theory) to camouflage their true intentions or justify them.

It would be naive to expect the world and regional powers to step aside and leave Central Caucaso-Asia alone. Reality is much more complicated: these countries should carefully match their national interests and their choice of regional and world powers as partners.

Eurasianism clearly preaches Russia's revival as an empire, but the even more moderate ideas now current in Russia do not exclude the "soft" alternative of imposing its interests on at least some of the local states, irrespective of their national interests.

The USA, on the other hand, is guided by objective considerations [33: 148-149]: far removed from the region, it cannot dominate over it and is strong enough not to become involved in unnecessary complications in this vast area.

From this it follows that America prefers a situation in which none of the countries dominates over Central Caucaso-Asia to allow the world community free financial and economic access to the region [33: 148-149].

American interests in the region are not limited to energy issues [36], which means that it will help the former Soviet republics overcome what remained of the Soviet economic system and promote the market economy and private sector as a solid foundation for economic growth and the rule of law. This will also help them to cope with social and ecological problems and profit from their energy resources and ramified export mainlines [37].

Some Russian experts admit that Moscow is holding forth about its historical, psychological, and other ties with former Soviet republics, while the United States rejects in principle any theories along the lines of "soft" or "limited" sovereignty of these republics [34: 108]. The Americans are convinced that Russia would profit from richer and more stable neighbors [34: 105].

The above suggests that America is not seeking integration with any of the regional countries; its policy completely corresponds to the local countries' national interests rooted in strengthening and developing state sovereignty, deepening democratization, and enhancing the market economy.

The newly coined term "Central Caucaso-Asia" does not merely specify the region's geographic identity: it is a conceptual idea of the interests of strengthening the local countries' state sovereignty, which, in principle, contradicts the spirit and idea of Eurasianism. All the Eurasian deliberations about so-called "Caucaso-Asianism" as potentially a theoretical antipode of Eurasianism are absolutely wrong. This is explained by the political heterogeneity of Central Caucaso-Asia, not all the members of which have similar thoughts about state sovereignty and the road toward it. At the same time, developing and strengthening state sovereignty, deepening democratization, and confirming the principles of a market economy are not prerogatives of the Central Caucaso-Asian countries alone.

პოლიტიკური მეცნიერებანი

ცენტრალური კავკაზია: იმპერიულიდან დემოკრატიული გეოპოლიტიკისაკენ

ვ. პაპავა

აკადემიის წევრი, პ. გუგუშვილის ეკონომიკის ინსტიტუტი, თბილისი

სტატიის მიზანია პოსტსაბჭოთა ცენტრალური ევრაზიის ხელახალი გააზრება. ამ რეგიონისადმი რუსი ევრაზიისტების მიდგომის თანახმად, რუსეთი იგივეა, რაც ევრაზია. ეს იდეა განსაკუთრებით პოპულარული გახდა პოსტსაბჭოთა პერიოდში. სინამდვილეში რვა პოსტსაბჭოთა ქვეყანა, რომლებიც წარმოადგენს ორ ქვერეგიონს – ცენტრალურ კავკასიასა (აზერბაიჯანი, საქართველო, სომხეთი) და ცენტრალურ აზიას (თურქმენეთი, ტაჯიკეთი, უზბეკეთი, ყაზახეთი და ყირგიზეთი), ქმნის ერთ დიდ რეგიონს – ცენტრალურ კავკაზიას. ეს ტერმინი ეფუძნება ამ რეგიონში შემავალი ქვეყნების სახელმწიფოებრივი სუვერენიტეტის იმ კონცეპტუალურ იდეას, რომლიც ძირშივე ეწინააღმდეგება რუსულ ევრაზიიზმს.

REFERENCES

1. *J. O'Loughlin, P. F. Talbot* (2005), Where in the World is Russia: Geopolitical Perceptions and Preferences of Ordinary Russians. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, **46**, 1.
2. *Z. Brzezinski* (2007), *The Geostrategic Triad: Living with China, Europe, and Russia*. Washington, D.C.: The CSIS Press.
3. *V. Tolz* (1998), Conflicting 'Homeland Myths' and Nation-State Building in Postcommunist Russia. *Slavic Review*, **57**, 2.
4. *Ş. Aktürk* (2006), Reflections on Central Eurasian Model: A Foundation Reply to Barfield on the Historiography of Ethno-Nationalisms. *Central Eurasian Studies Review*, **5**, 2.
5. *L. Tchantouridze* (2004), After Marxism-Leninism: Eurasianism and Geopolitics in Russia, in: L. Tchantouridze, ed., *Geopolitics: Global Problems and Regional Concerns*. Winnipeg: Centre for Defense and Security Studies, University of Manitoba.
6. *M. Bassin* (1991), Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geopolitical Space. *Slavic Review*, **50**, 1.
7. *M. W. Lewis, K. E. Wigen* (1997), *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
8. *A. Dugin* (2000), Evraziiskii triumf, in: A. Dugin (ed.), *Osnovy Evraziistva*. Moscow: Arktogeia-Tsentr (in Russian).
9. *N. A. Nartov, V. N. Nartov* (2007), *Geopolitika*. Moscow: UNITI-DANA (in Russian).
10. *A. Dugin* (1997), *Osnovy geopolitiki. Geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii*. Moscow: Arktogeia-Tsentr (in Russian).
11. *I. Panarin* (2006), *Informatsionnaya voina i geopolitika*. Moscow: Pokolenie Publishers (in Russian).
12. *M. L. Hauner* (1994), The Disintegration of the Soviet Eurasian Empire: An Ongoing Debate, in: M. Mesbahi (ed.), *Central Asia and the Caucasus after the Soviet Union*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
13. *K. Weisbrode* (2001), *Central Eurasia: Prize or Quicksand? Contenting Views of Instability in Karabakh, Ferghana and Afghanistan*. New York: Oxford University Press.
14. *V. Papava* (2008), 'Central Caucasasia' Instead of 'Central Eurasia'. *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, **2** (50).
15. *V. Papava* (2008), Central Caucaso-Asia: Toward a Redefinition of Post-Soviet Central Eurasia". *Azerbaijan in the World. The Electronic Publication of Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy*, **I**, 17, October 1, on-line at http://www.ada.edu.az/biweekly/issues/156/20090328041927833.html.
16. *V. Papava* (2009), Eurasia Versus Central Caucaso-Asia: On the Geopolitics of Central Caucaso-Asia. *CICERO Foundation Great Debate Paper* No. 09/8, December, on-line at http://www.cicerofoundation.org/lectures/Vladimer_Papava_On_the_Geopolitics_of_Central_Caucaso-Asia.pdf

17. *E. Ismailov* (2008), Central Eurasia: Its Geopolitical Function in the 21st Century. *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, **2** (50).
18. *E. Ismailov, V. Papava* (2008), A New Concept for the Caucasus. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, ***8***, *3*.
19. *E. Ismailov, V. Papava* (2008), *The Central Caucasus: Problems of Geopolitical Economy*. New York: Nova Science Publishers.
20. *M. P. Amineh, H. Houweling* (2005), Introduction: The Crisis in IR-Theory: Towards a Critical Geopolitics Approach, in: M. P. Amineh, H. Houweling (eds.), *Central Eurasia in Global Politics: Conflict, Security and Development*. Leiden: Brill.
21. *K. Meyer* (2004), *The Dust of Empire: The Race for Supremacy in the Asian Heartland*. London: Abacus.
22. *X. Guo* (2006), The Energy Security in Central Eurasia: The Geopolitical Implications to China's Energy Strategy, *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, **4**, 4, on-line at http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/CEF/Quarterly/November_2006/Guo.pdf.
23. *E. Ismailov, M. Esenov* (2006), Central Eurasia in the New Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Dimensions, in: *Central Eurasia 2005. Analytical Annual*. Luleå: CA&CC Press.
24. *R. L. Canfield* (1992), Restructuring in Greater Central Asia. *Asian Survey*, **32**, 10.
25. *S. F. Starr* (2005), *A 'Greater Central Asia Partnership' for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors.* Silk Road Paper, March 2005, Washington, D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, on-line at http://www.silkroadstudies.org/CACI/Strategy.pdf.
26. *S. F. Starr* (2005), A Partnership for Central Asia. *Foreign Affairs*, **84**, 4.
27. *A. Sengupta* (2009), *Heartlands of Eurasia: the Geopolitics of Political Space*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
28. *A. Åslund* (2003), Eventual Success of Market Reform, in: J. H. Kalicki, E. K. Lawson (eds.), *Russian-Eurasian Renaissance? U.S. Trade and Investment in Russia and Eurasia*. Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.
29. *J. Mankoff* (2009), *Eurasian Energy Security*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations.
30. *F. Hill* (2004), *Energy Empire: Oil, Gas and Russia's Revival*. London: The Foreign Policy Center, on-line at http://www.brookings.edu/views/articles/Fhill/20040930.pdf.
31. ***I.*** *Tomberg* (2003), Energy Policy in the Countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, **4** (22).
32. *J. Eyvazov* (2004), *Bezopasnost' Kavkaza i stabil'nost' razvitiya Azerbaidzhanskoy Respubliki*. Baku: Nurlan Publishers (in Russian).
33. *Z. Brzezinski* (1997), *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*. New York: Basic Books.
34. *A. I. Utkin* (2000), *Amerikanskaya strategiya dlya XXI veka*. Moscow: Logos Publishers (in Russian).
35. *F. Tolipov* (2007), Russia in Central Asia: Retreat, Retention, or Return? *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, **5** (47).
36. *A. Jaffe* (2001), US Policy Towards the Caspian Region: Can the Wish-List be Realized?, in: G. Chufrin (ed.), *The Security of the Caspian Sea Region*. New York: Oxford University Press.
37. *S. R. Mann* (2003), Caspian Futures, In: J. H. Kalicki, E. K. Lawson (eds.), *Russian-Eurasian Renaissance? U.S. Trade and Investment in Russia and Eurasia*. Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

Received November, 2009