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The geopolitical dimension of the Russia–West relationship in the concept of Eurasianism

Geopolityczny wymiar relacji Rosja–Zachód
w koncepcji euroazjatyizmu

Abstract: The article presents the concept of classical Eurasianism developed by Russian intellectuals in exile in the 1920s and 1930s. The author analyzes from the point of view of geosophy taken as a study of how people perceive geographical space. Eurasians in their works gave the geographical concepts legendary and mythical features. On the Eurasian mental map, the center of the world is Russia-Eurasia contrasted with peripheral Europe, which is a hotbed of decay.

Keywords: Eurasia, Eurasianism, Russia, Europe, geopolitics

Abstrakt: W artykule przedstawiono koncepcję klasycznego euroazjatyizmu, wypracowaną przez intelektualistów rosyjskich na emigracji w latach 20. i 30. Autor dokonuje analizy z punktu widzenia geosofii traktowanej jako badanie sposobu, w jaki ludzie postrzegają przestrzeń geograficzną. Eurazjaci w swoich pracach nadali pojęciom pierwotnie geograficznym cechy legendarne i mityczne. Na euroazjatyckiej mapie mentalnej centrum świata to Rosja-Eurazja, przeciwstawiona peryferyjnej Europie, będącej siedliskiem rozkładu.

Słowa kluczowe: Eurazja, euroazjatyzm, Rosja, Europa, geopolityka

Introduction

It is an open question of the influence of Eurasian ideology on the Kremlin's real activities in the sphere of foreign policy. Some of its elements can be found in Russian policy towards the Central Europe and the Middle East. There is no doubt, however, that this ideology is the key to understand Russia's actions on the

international stage because it is the most influential current of Russian geopolitical thought. His representatives today are not original thinkers but continuators of the concepts developed by Russian emigrants in the 1920s and 1930s. Therefore, to explain Russia's actions on a global scale, it is necessary to understand the concepts of classical Eurasianism developed 100 years ago.

The basic research problem presents the attempt to establish the basic principles of classical Eurasianism due to the fact that it was a collective movement created by Russian intellectuals of the young generation who represented very different scientific specialties. The ideas of Eurasianism in exile were identified by such scholars as a philosopher and linguist Nikolay Trubetskoy, a geographer and economist Petr Savitskiy, a musicologist and publicist, Petr Suvchinskiy, a philosopher and theologian Georgiy Florovskiy, historians: Georgiy Vernadskiy, Petr Bitsilli, philosophers: Lev Karsavin, a literary critic and a literary historian Dmitriy Svyatopolk-Mirskiy, an economist Yakov Sadovskiy. They also represented a whole spectrum of political views from monarchists to national Bolsheviks. The main hypothesis of the article is that the common denominator of very different currents of classical Eurasianism is the basic assumption that Europe is the periphery of Eurasia-Russia not only in the geographical and geopolitical sense but above all in cultural terms. Both of these concepts are metageographical and ideological.

Eurasia as the center of the world

Analytical categories of geosophies such as mental maps, territorial myths and stereotypes, mythological territories and legendary spaces are useful for analyzing Eurasian views. At the center of Savitskiy's mental map there is Eurasia identified with Russia. As a geographically, economically, historically and culturally homogeneous area, it is the center in relation to diverse and secondary Europe in every respect. On its geospherical map of the world, the Eurasian center connects and unites the peripheries which would otherwise quickly completely decay.

Eurasia as the geographical center of the world

According to Savitskiy, Europe is all that lies west of the Russian border and Asia is all that lies to its south and southeast¹. Therefore, for Savitskiy, there is no division between Asian and European Russia introduced by a high-ranking Tsarist official and distinguished researcher of the Urals – Vasyl Tatishchev. In his Russian reference book, he proposed that the Urals should become the border between Europe and Asia. That view gained the support of the tsarist court and became one of the elements of imperial ideology. The concept that the Russian Empire consists of the European and Asian parts was only undermined in the 19th century by Slavophiles. Nikolai Danilevski developed the ideas of Pan-Slavism² that supported the thesis about the unity of Russia as one geographical and natural region.

Forging one territorial myth created by Tatishchev during the reign of Petr I, Savitskiy created a new myth of Russia-Eurasia, assuming that the Urals do not divide Russia because on its both sides there are the tundra, the forest, and deserts that do not differ from each other. In this sense, Russia was neither Europe nor Asia but a separate continent. When defining the territory of Russia - Eurasia, Savitskiy included to it the plains: The White Sea - Caucasus, West Siberian, Turkestan and areas located east of them³. The southern border of Eurasia understood in this way were the mountain massifs of the Caucasus, Hindu Kush, Kopet-Dag and Tianan. The western border was the narrowing of the continent between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. Savitskiy pointed out that this region had a number of natural botanical and climatic borders, such as the January isotherm or the beech and yew zone. Savitskiy defined Eurasia as an uninterrupted band of alternating forest, steppe and, tundra zones from the Carpathians to Chingan as Eurasia *sensu stricto* in contrast to Eurasia *sensu latiore* von Humboldt. On his mental map, traditional Eurasia was not divided

¹ P. Savitskiy, *Geograficheskiye i geopoliticheskiye osnovy yevraziystva*, [in:] *Kontinent Yevraziya*, Moskva 1997, p. 298.

² N.J. Danilevskiy, *Rossiya i Yevropa*, Sankt-Pietierburg 1991.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 298.

into Europe and Asia, but into Eurasia Proper and its peripheries: Asian (China, India, Iran) and European (areas located west of the Nemunas-Danube line).

Eurasia as the center of civilization

Savitskiy believed that the geographical environment had a decisive impact on culture, but did not treat this influence as a one-sided determination. Avoiding the trap of reductionism, the Russian geopolitician believed that natural conditions stimulated the emergence of specific types of economy in individual areas. In turn, the model of economic development could determine social and cultural changes.

Based on such assumptions, Savitskiy compared civilizations in terms of geographical and climatic conditions, formulated the principle that the latest cultures were formed in the coldest places. In accordance with this principle, he divided cultures as follows:

1. The Chaldean-Egyptian culture, dominant from 1000 BC to our era - average annual temperature + 20°C.
2. The Early Asian, Middle Eastern culture dominant from 1000 BC to our era - average annual temperature + 15°C.
3. The Mediterranean, Greek-Roman culture dominating from the beginning of our era up to the year 1000 - average annual temperature + 10°C.
4. The Western European, Romanesque-German culture, dominant from 1000 AD to the present day - average annual temperature + 5°C.
5. The Forecast for the third millennium: Eurasian, Slavic-Turanian culture will dominate - average annual temperature 0°C.

Eurasia as an economic center

For Savitskiy, the formation of Eurasia was dictated by economic factors. In the first Eurasian collection of *Iskhod k Vostoky* published in Sofia in 1921, he wrote an article *Kontinent-Okean* in which he presented the process of shaping Eurasia from an

economic point of view. According to Savitskiy, the development of the productive forces of individual countries and lands depended on the conditions of transport enabling trade. Therefore, geographical and climatic conditions are the basic factor influencing economic development. In his article, Savitskiy noted that land transport prices could be up to fifty times higher than the cost of sea transport. This difference meant that continental countries were developing their economies in a completely different way than maritime countries. To illustrate this thesis, the Russian geopolitician stated that countries located on the ocean might ignore the inland market because the agricultural products they needed could be imported by sea thanks to the low freight price. Savitskiy's example of such an economic model was England's trade relations with New Zealand. On the other hand, due to the high price of land transport to shopping centers located on the banks of the seas, continental countries prefer intra-continental trade. This type of exchange creates economic ties between countries located inside the continent, which further leads to close cultural and political relationships.

Eurasia as a historical center

According to Savitskiy, the history of Eurasia is above all the history of political and cultural unification of peoples living in individual zones of the forest and steppe. This tendency, caused mainly by continental economic exchange, is for Savitskiy characteristic of Eurasia, in contrast to Europe and Asia fragmented politically and culturally for centuries. According to Russian geopolitics, the unification processes of Eurasia began even in the Bronze Age and was continued successively by the Scythians, Avars, Huns, Turks, Mongols, and Russians. That is why the Russian era in the history of Eurasia started in the 16th century being the extension of the Scythian, Huan and Mongol eras, and the borders of Eurasia coincided with those of the Russian Empire. For Savitskiy, Russia was *the successor of the Great Khan, continuator of the work of Chingis and Timur, the unifier of Asia; Russia – part of a special “Ukrainian-seaside” world, a carrier of deep cultural tradition*

... In it, "steppe" and "settled" elements combine⁴. Eurasia understood in this way, combining the achievements of all previous eras, became the legendary space.

Eurasia as a cultural center

Writing about Russia as a synthesis of steppe and sedentary elements, Savitskiy referred to the Slavophil thesis about the mutual influence of the European forest and the Asian steppe. The way the Russian geopolitician interpreted the historical relationship between the forest and the steppe was the reference to the idea of the cultural circle and the cultural area of Friedrich Ratzel. The German scholar believed that cultural circles emerging at various points of the globe interacted with each other to create new qualities. Cultural contact, according to this concept, depended on geographical conditions. Ratzel, as a diffusionist who emphasized in his works the decisive role of migration, believed that isolated cultures were doomed, while the cultures resulting from the contact of different cultural circles were vital and dynamic⁵. In his writings, Savitskiy treated the forest and the steppe as cultural circles, the contact of which led to the creation of a unique Eurasian culture that could not be equated with either the forest or the steppe. For the author of the Eurasian continent, the West European Germanic Roman civilization and the Asian, Chinese, Iranian and Hindu civilizations were isolated and peripheral cultural areas doomed to effeteness and stagnation as opposed to dynamic and vital Eurasia.

As Ratzel, Savitskiy assumed the impact of geographical conditions on the emergence of specific types of culture. According to the Russian scholar in Eurasia, during centuries-old colonization of steppes by settlers, an Eurasian psychological system developed, consisting of a close relationship between the organization of society and nature. Such a view was a reference to the thesis repeatedly found in both Russian and Western literature about the decisive

⁴ P. Savitskiy, *Step' i osedlost'. Na putyakh*, Berlin 1922, p. 341–356.

⁵ H. Wanklyn, F. Ratzel, *Biographical Memoire and Bibliography*, Cambridge 1961.

influence of wide Russian spaces on the national character of Russians. According to Savitskiy, in the community inhabiting the steppe, a complicated *psychological type of Eurasianism has developed, which... values tradition... is as simple as naivety like Tolstoy and at the same time complex, sophisticated and dialectical as Dostoyevsky and yet - although rarely - harmonious like Pushkin and Khomiakov*⁶.

Eurasia as a religious center

For Savitskiy, Eurasian traditionalism is primarily manifested in his attachment to religion, which is the basic culture-forming factor. That is why the Eurasian cultural unity is a primarily religious unity: *In fact, religion creates and defines culture; and culture is one of the manifestations of religion and not the other way around which bad scientists claim today. Cultural unity, in turn, affects ethnological unity... it can be argued that just as religion creates culture, so culture creates an ethnological type, and the ethnological type chooses or finds "its" territory and thoroughly transforms it.*⁷

Savitskiy for whom *religion was a unity connecting the living and the dead, the past, the present and the future*⁸ was the continuator of Khomiakóv, Dostoyevsky and Solovov, who expressed the thesis on Orthodoxy as the only basis for all culture and social life. Eurasians, like the Slavophiles, believed that Orthodoxy based on the Byzantine doctrine of the symphony of secular and spiritual power is particularly predestined to ensure the unity of the ethnically diverse area of the Russian Empire.

Eurasia as a mythical place and *miestorazvitie*

In his writings, Savitskiy considered the phenomenon of Eurasia from the point of view of geography, history, ethnology, and religious studies. All these views were combined when he wrote

⁶ Ibidem, p. 43.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 36.

⁸ P. Savitskiy, *Dva mira. Kontinent Yevraziya*, Moskva 1997, p. 123.

about Eurasia as a *Miestorazwitiie*. This concept had a basic function in Savitskiy's geopolitical theory. *Miestorazwitiie* was a place where, according to the author of *Kontinient Jewrazja*, there were fertile soils, useful mineral deposits, vegetation and animals – and thus factors enabling the survival and development of human aggregates⁹. Combining various manifestations of the organic and inorganic world using the concept of *Miestorazwitiie* was the result of Savitskiy's application of the methodological directive resulting from the concept of the synthesis of sciences. *Miestorazwitiie* should be understood as a synthetic category, covering both human aggregates and the territory occupied by them. In his works, Savitskiy distinguished a variety of different types of *Miestorazwitiies* – from the smallest, which constituted *each court and village*¹⁰ to the largest, which was the earthly globe. In this hierarchy, Russia, Eurasia, who is, held a special position according to the Russian scholar *Miestorazwitiie, the only whole, an economic individual – at the same time geographical, ethnic, economic, historical, etc., etc. with a landscape*¹¹. To put it simply, it was a mythical space. According to this concept, Russia-Eurasia owed its unique position on a global scale not only to its central geographical location but also to the synthesis of two smaller cities of the forest and steppe.

Europe as a periphery

Eurasians among Russian emigrants represented the extreme anti-Western option despite the fact that they were mostly Western supporters and liberals before the emigration. Savitskiy's ideological evolution was very typical here, as he was a student of the leading ideologist of the cadets – Petr Struve and then his close associate in the government of General Petr Vrangel. Many Russian emigrants felt that it was in the interest of France and England to get Russia into a lost war. France, threatened by the German attack in 1914,

⁹ P. Savitskiy, *Geograficheskii obzor Rossii – Yevrazii, Kontinent Yevraziya*, Moskva 1997, p. 282.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 285.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 283.

was saved by a Russian offensive in the East Prussia, which ended in the total defeat of the Russian army. The fact that the Western allies did not sufficiently support the Whites during the civil war was considered a betrayal by allies for which Russia suffered such huge sacrifices. Bitterness intensified the attitude of Western governments to the Russians who fought against the Bolsheviks, and after the emaciation of the Whites, found themselves abroad. The reasons for the emergence of the Eurasian movement was aptly described in his memoirs by Lew Gumiliow, writing about its genesis:

When Vrangel's troops evacuated in Gallipoli in 1920 began to analyze the causes of their defeat, among the most creative and intellectual parts of the White Army arose the problem of understanding the causes and effects of the Great Revolution of 1917: one of the emigre thinkers believed that they were witnessing a simple coup, an exile that would pass like a terrible dream; others believed that the collapse of the monarchy was inevitable and that the fallen regime should be replaced by a parliamentary republic with a capitalist economic system cooperating with Western democracies. The third, of whom there were very few, tried to discover the deep, historical causes of Russia's fate. They came to paradoxical conclusions in economic, political and ideological aspects, and categorically split with monarchists – reactionaries and liberal constitutionalists... the new movement received the name "Eurasianism"¹².

Europe as a geographical periphery

On the Eurasian mental map, Europe is only a peripheral peninsula relative to the center of the Old World, which is Russia-Eurasia. According to Savitskiy, Eurasia in the old sense of the word was no longer divided into Europe and Asia, but 1) the middle continent or proper Eurasia and two peripheral worlds: 2) Asian (China, India, Iran) and 3) European, bordering Eurasia approximately on the line: Nemunas – West Bug – San – estuary of the Danube¹³. The work of the Eurasians rejected the division into

¹² L. Gumilev, *Zametki poslednego yevraziytsa*, [in:] *Ritmy yevrazii*, Moskva 1993, p. 33.

¹³ P. Savitskiy, *Yevraziystvo, Kontinent - Yevraziya*, Moskva 1997, p. 42.

Eastern, Central and Western Europe adopted in Western science. For the Eurasians, the eastern part of Europe belonged to Eurasia, while by Western Europe they understood all areas west of the tsarist empire. Savitskiy argued that Eurasia, Asia, and Europe were separate geographical worlds pointing out that the peripheral lands were symmetrically located in relation to Russia – Eurasia and show a number of similarities – both Europe and the Far East are wooded areas with an oceanic climate as opposed to the steppe Eurasia with a continental climate.

Europe as a civilization periphery

Eurasians believed that cultural changes are closely related to the geographical and climatic factors in which a particular culture developed. Climate and geomorphological structures might be factors conducive to both the development and stagnation of given cultures. According to Savitskiy, the mosaic structure of Europe promoted all sorts of separatism: political, cultural, economic. That is why in Europe and small worlds were created, living only with their interests, unlike Eurasia, in which continuous demographic and cultural diffusion took place. Savitskiy also repeated the typical territorial stereotype that the geographical environment contributed to the creation of a specific “Russian soul”. He did it in a very original way, claiming that Europe's cultural stagnation also resulted from its moderate climate by writing that:

*Europe is unknown neither too high nor too low temperatures, which are the rule in the climate of Russia-Eurasia. Can you not find in the spiritual life of Russia-Eurasia an analogy to this wide amplitude of temperature fluctuations? Does this not turn out to be characteristic of Russian-Eurasian culture, or does it serve to distinguish the Russian-Eurasian soul with such a combination of spiritual darkness and smallness with such intensity of enlightenment and gust that is inaccessible to the European soul and unknown in European culture, balanced and finite in its relatively low spiritual amplitude?*¹⁴

¹⁴ P. Savitskiy, *Dva Mira...*, p. 155.

Europe as an economic periphery

According to Savitskiy, the peripheral location of Europe and the Far East also influenced their different economic development model compared to Eurasia, based on the sea trade. From this point of view, the next stages in the development of Western Europe: feudalism and capitalism were an anomaly unheard of in Russia. In the Eurasian writings, he opposed the European "urban economy" of the Eurasian agricultural economy. This territorial myth formed the basis of another stereotype. The profit-oriented capitalist Savitskiy opposed the ideal type of "good host" (Khozyain) living in harmony in nature, in contrast to Europe populated by alienated slaves.

These concepts were developed by a historian Sergei Pushkarev, who believed that a layer of the feudal aristocracy had not been formed in Russia. Russian nobility, whose significance grew in the 18th century, could not be considered feudal lords, because the basic principle of feudalism was to combine state power with land ownership, while in Russia the dynastic principle was followed. Western feudal lords effectively limited royal power, while in Russia noblemen were only servants of the ruler. Therefore, in Russia, from the beginning of its state existence, the Byzantine theory of absolute power established by God was used. The power of the monarchy in Russia was a factor far more influential and known social development than in Western European countries. As Europe developed towards feudalism and the state monarchy, Russia bypassed both these stages.

According to the Russian historian, the cities appeared in the Middle Ages as one of the effects of feudalism. Because there was no feudalism in Russia, cities in the European understanding were not established there either - as communities with their rights. Few Russian cities in the Middle Ages were completely subordinated to the ruler. In the cities of Western Europe, there was economic and cultural development of the middle class, which soon reached political power creating representative democracy. The main

difference between Europe and Russia was that there was no European urban economy in Russian history¹⁵.

Europe as a historical periphery

Developing the Eurasian concept of Europe as a peripheral historian and literary scholar Petr Bitsilli concluded that the division of the Old World into the East (understood as Asia) and the West (understood as Europe), functioning in science since the times of Herodotus, is the result of a Eurocentric point of view. Like Savitskiy Bitsilli, he replaced one territorial myth with another:

*the concept of the history of the Old World as the history of the duel of the West and the East can be contrasted with the concept of the center and the periphery as a no less permanent historical fact*¹⁶.

A similar approach was used by Sergei Pushkarev in his work on the differences between the historical development of Europe and Russia¹⁷. The point of departure for Pushkariev's considerations was the thesis that there were no general laws of historical development that could be used to study the history of Europe and Russia. According to the author, the development of Russia took place in a completely different way than it did in Western Europe, in which until the nineteenth century there was a state society while in Russia there were no states in the European sense. In Western Europe, various forms of social organization differed in privileges, while in Russia they were obliged to the state.

Europe as a cultural periphery

Assuming that the development of individual cultures was closely related to geographical conditions, Eurasians believed that Europe was not only a geographical and economic periphery but also

¹⁵ S. Pushkarev, *Rossiya i Yevropa v ikh istoricheskom proshlom*, [in:] *Yevraziyskiy vremennik*, Parizh 1927, p. 121–152.

¹⁶ P.M. Bitsilli. «Vostok» i «Zapad» v istorii Starogo Sveta, [in:] *Na putyakh*. Berlin 1922, p. 22–34.

¹⁷ S. Pushkarev, *Rossiya i Yevropa...*, p. 121–152.

a cultural periphery concerning Eurasia. According to the Eurasians, the peripheral location of Europe resulted in the creation of an imitative culture in relation to the original Greek-Byzantine culture. The thesis on the secondary nature of European culture was developed by a historian and literary scholar Petr Bitsilli, who in his support cited examples from the history of medieval and Renaissance art. Another example of the history of art cited by Bitsilli was the transition from conceptualism to realism in the 14th-century wall painting which took place both in Byzantium and in Italy.

Europe as a religious periphery

In Eurasian terms, the history of Europe consisted of subsequent stages of its decomposition. According to Savitskiy, the cultural unity of Europe existed only during the period of Romanesque-Catholic domination, the collapse of the Charlemagne monarchy in the place of which the emerging powers arose: the empire and papacy were the beginning of the end of a universalist Europe. German-Protestant elements, heresies, and schisms also contributed to the collapse of Europe's unity.

According to Bitsilli, certain similarities between the East and the West were due to the fact that their common spiritual source was Platonic idealism. The differences, however, resulted from the secondary nature of the spiritual development of Western Europe in relation to Byzantium steeped in Greek culture. Eastern religious thought inspired by Plotinian neoplatonism paid more attention to the role of mysticism, while in the West, where neoplatonism was learnt second hand, more emphasis was placed on rationalist scholasticism. On the other hand, the effect of isolation of peripheral European culture was not stagnation as in the case of Eurasian cultures but progressing degeneration.

Summary

Eurasianism is above all a critical concept, depicting Europe as a hotbed of all evil. The positive elements of the Eurasian doctrine

are only an addition to its critical part. The creators of the doctrine, who in their publications devoted a lot of space to thorough criticism of Europe, while writing about the future, utopian Eurasia only vaguely. Among the Russian intellectuals forming the Eurasian movement in exile in the 1920s and 1930s, only Nikolai Alekseyev attempted to present the future Russian system of Eurasia¹⁸. The Eurasian mental map is bipolar. At one pole, Eurasians placed the category of Europe, which they characterized using such concepts as pride, decay, heresy, and rationalism. At the other extreme one, mythical Eurasia was presented in a very general way – a vision of unity and true faith.

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¹⁸ N.N. Alekseyev, *Teoriya gosudarstva: Teoret. Gosudarstvovedeniye. Gosudarstv. ustroystvo. Gosudarstv. ideal*, Parizh 1931.