Central Caucaso-Asia: from Imperial to Democratic Geopolitics

Vladimer Papava

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.

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-
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.
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Received November, 2009