Three Faces of Russia’s Neo-Eurasianism

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The publication of Vladimir Putin’s article ‘A New Integration Project for Eurasia: The Future in the Making’, in Izvestia on 3 October 2011, officially marked Russia’s departure from Europe and from the West more generally. The article proclaimed the ambitious goal of building ‘a powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world and serving as an efficient bridge between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region’. Although Putin specifically emphasised that the project was mainly about economic integration and had nothing to do with the revival of the Soviet Union, many in the West interpreted it as a plan to restore the Russian Empire. Certainly, the article bore many of the hallmarks of a neo-Eurasianist outlook.

The concept of Eurasianism originated in the Russian émigré community in the 1920s as a reaction to the nightmare of the First World War and the defeat of pro-Western Russian liberals by the Bolsheviks. While the term has been defined and interpreted in a number of ways, in essence it simply means that Russia is not Europe, and that European norms, values and principles do not suit Russia, which will go its own way. This usually entails some form of repressive rule at home and imperial expansion into other territories. The concept tends to be revived every time Russia fails to
become an advanced power by existing standards and feels a need to justify its backwardness with metaphysical theories.

The rising tide of nostalgia in Russia for the country’s past imperial greatness, both in the twentieth century and further back, suggests that Eurasianism is once again on the upswing. This is concerning because, as historian Alexander Yanov has observed of the original Eurasianists, ‘after a strong, brilliant and quite liberal beginning in the 1920s’, they eventually degenerated into a ‘reactionary émigré sect’ embracing ‘extremist nationalism’. ‘In the end,’ he warned, ‘all Russian anti-Western movements, no matter how liberal they started, always followed a similar path of degeneration.’

Eurasianism as a conservative nationalist ideology

The modern ideology of neo-Eurasianism owes much to the beliefs of the first Eurasianists – intellectuals traumatised by the collapse of the tsarist empire – and to the work of Lev Gumilev, a Soviet-era historian, anthropologist and interpreter who devoted his career to studying the origins and evolution of ethnic groups (‘ethnogenesis’). Early Eurasianists subscribed to an odd mixture of sometimes competing views about the origins of the Russian people or ‘ethnos’, the impact of Byzantine and Mongol–Tatar rule on Russia’s evolution, and the coexistence and complementarity of Orthodoxy and Islam. Initially, the Eurasianists viewed the USSR as the embodiment of the Eurasian idea, but the Bolsheviks’ rejection of Orthodox Christianity, considered one of the pillars of Eurasianism, led the Eurasianists to reject Sovietism. In 1930, Nikolai Trubetzkoy, one of the founders of Eurasianism, wrote to Pyotr Savitsky, a devoted partisan of the concept, saying, ‘We predicted the emergence of a new Eurasian culture. Now this culture [the USSR] actually exists, but it turns out to be a perfect nightmare, and we are horrified by it and its disregard for the well-known traditions of European culture.’

A centrepiece of Gumilev’s philosophy was the hypothesis that external, mostly natural, phenomena such as shifts in solar-radiation levels can at times produce extraordinary activity and development among peoples living in affected territories by triggering what he called their inner energy or ‘passionarity’. People at the height of their passionarity can be expected
to conquer territory, achieve national statehood and make breakthroughs in science, technology and the arts.

While such ideas were long considered marginal, the rapid deterioration of Russia–West relations after 2012 has made them more attractive to many Russians, including members of the country’s political elite. Gumilev was even cited by Putin in his annual address to the Federal Assembly in December 2012, when he said, ‘Who will take the lead and who will remain outsiders and inevitably lose their independence will depend not only on the economic potential, but primarily on the will of each nation, on its inner energy which Lev Gumilev termed “passionarity”: the ability to move forward and to embrace change.’ Leading post-Soviet Eurasianist thinkers, including Alexander Dugin, Alexander Panarin and Alexander Prokhanov, have likewise embraced Gumilev’s ideas, finding in his philosophy support for their own hatred of the West and belief in the pre-eminence of the ‘sacred’ state over the individual, in the special mission of the Russian people in the modern world, and in the vulnerability of Russian sovereignty to the encroachments of a hostile West. As Dugin put it in his *Foundations of Geopolitics*,

The new Eurasian empire will be constructed on the fundamental principle of the common enemy: the rejection of Atlanticism, strategic control of the USA, and the refusal to allow liberal values to dominate us. This common civilisational impulse will be the basis of a political and strategic union.

Gumilev expressed a similar concern that ‘Russia could really become a colony, a dependent territory of Western Europe’, but it would be wrong to fully equate his philosophy with that of contemporary Eurasianists. Unlike his intellectual successors, Gumilev sought all his life to stay away from politics, preferring his own world of provocative ideas and theories. He can be considered among the most erudite representatives of the ‘silent majority’ – members of the Soviet intelligentsia whose lives were shattered by Joseph Stalin’s prison camps.

One point on which the neo-Eurasianists and their predecessors agree concerns how Mongol–Tatar rule over Kievan Rus’ (a loose federation of East Slavic and Finnic peoples) in 1240–1480 affected the development of the
Russian state. Indeed, views on this subject have become a kind of litmus test of one’s political and moral principles in Russia. While this period is often referred to as the ‘Mongol–Tatar yoke’, the Eurasianists consider it an instance of divine mercy, believing that it saved the emergent Russian ethnoss from aggressive neighbours to the west, thus allowing it to develop its own statehood. Yet this overlooks the fact that before the Mongol–Tatar invasion, Russian principalities were developing much like the rest of Europe. Cities in Kievan Rus’ all had a town assembly (veche) comprising all free male citizens, who met to discuss and resolve the community’s most important problems. Ancient trade centres such as Novgorod and Pskov did not differ very much from other Hanseatic trading cities in their heyday. In that sense, Kievan Rus’ had already developed a form of statehood – early feudal monarchy – that was destroyed by the Mongol invasion, which introduced the so-called Horde system. The loss of the veche system served to halt the spread of democracy and self-government among the various principalities, while the Horde system laid the foundations for Muscovite autocracy through its emphasis on the centralisation of power, personal loyalty to a single ruler, strict social hierarchies, the militarisation of the nation and a huge repressive apparatus. This system was perfected during the reign of Ivan the Terrible and resurrected in the twentieth century by Stalin who, despite becoming the unchallenged leader of the Soviet Union by the mid-1930s, continued to carry out purges and terrorise the country with widespread arrests, executions and forced-labour camps. An echo of this system’s repressive methods can even be heard today, for instance in the words of Vladislav Surkov, Putin’s personal adviser and the architect of ‘managed democracy’, who wrote earlier this year that the ‘high internal tension associated with the retention of vast heterogeneous spaces, and constant presence in the midst of geopolitical struggle make the state’s military–police functions the most important and decisive’. The Horde system also reinforced serfdom, forcing the Russian princes to take twice as much from their serfs and thus ensuring that they could not be freed. Stalin introduced his own form of serfdom when he forced the
bulk of the Soviet peasantry into *kolkhozes* (collective farms). Farmers were not allowed to leave these farms unless they had been issued a single-use certificate by the farm’s chairman indicating the purpose and length of the absence, which could not last more than 30 days. Farmers would not be issued with their own passports until 1974. Valery Zorkin, head of Russia’s Constitutional Court, recently praised serfdom as the ‘staple’ (*skrepy*) holding Russia together in the nineteenth century: ‘Even with all of its shortcomings, serfdom was exactly the main staple holding the inner unity of the nation. It was no accident that the peasants, according to historians, told their former masters after the reforms: “We were yours, and you – ours.”’

The hypocrisy of elites pursuing a European way of life for themselves while imposing Horde-style rule on the people (today under the convenient banner of ‘Eurasianism’) has been seen before in Russia, notably in tsarist times and under the late Soviet *nomenklatura*. This suggests that 250 years of Mongol rule left a deep imprint not only on the genotype, lifestyle and vocabulary of the Russian people, but more troublingly on its socio-political and moral character. The absolute power and arbitrariness of the Horde system turned Russians of all stations, including princes, into powerless slaves whom the incoming barbarians could, at their whim, deprive of power, property, family and life. Slaves who are freed do not, as a rule, eliminate slavery, but rather recreate it by taking the place of their masters. The Mongols may have left, but the yoke remained.

Another event that had far-reaching consequences for Russia’s evolution was the self-proclaimed autocephaly (independence) of the Moscow Patriarchate from the Church of Constantinople in 1448, after which Moscow assumed the role of the standard-bearer of the Orthodox faith and became, in effect, a ‘Third Rome’. Whereas in Europe a centuries-long rivalry between papal Rome and the emperors of the Holy Roman Empire produced a medieval division of powers, the Russian church submitted to state power in accordance with the Byzantine tradition. The merging of the church with the state in Russia meant that the latter took on a sacred character, ruling not on the basis of law, social contract or tradition, but with the blessing of the Orthodox faith. This placed the state above both the law and the aspirations of the people.
Russian Orthodoxy’s self-proclaimed autocephaly also meant that Russia separated itself from the Christian West, which was just entering the Renaissance. This served to conserve Russia’s social, economic, scientific, artistic and philosophical backwardness. In England, the Magna Carta Liberatum, which provided the foundation for individual rights, was granted as early as 1215, and the English Bill of Rights, which set limits on the power of the monarch and established the rights of Parliament, was adopted in 1689. In Russia, meanwhile, serfdom was not abolished until 1861 with the reforms of Alexander II, and constitutional monarchy was established only in 1905, with the October Manifesto issued by Emperor Nicholas II. Whereas the University of Paris was founded in 1150 and the University of Cambridge in 1209, Russia did not open its first university until 1724.

Even the most pro-European Russian rulers, such as Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, did not advocate deep democratic reforms but rather focused on turning Russia into a modern military empire capable of competing successfully against powerful European states. Peter the Great launched a substantial war industry and created a new navy in the Baltic Sea. Many young Russian nobles were sent abroad to acquire a modern European education so they could become mariners and engineers. The tsar created the Russian Academy of Sciences and the first Russian university, and built his new, westernised capital, St Petersburg, on the bones of hundreds of thousands of serfs. Catherine the Great was familiar with the ideas of the European Enlightenment and introduced some progressive reforms, including a loosening of censorship, a prohibition on torture and the development of education. At the same time, she helped the nobility – her main power base – to solidify its control over millions of Russian serfs and suppressed a peasant uprising led by Yemelyan Pugachev. Only the reforms of Alexander II – ‘the Liberator’ – can be seen as genuinely progressive, though still subject to retreats and reversals. Thus, the foundations of Russian statehood have been in place for centuries: rigid authoritarian rule; the subordination of the economy to political and military goals; a repressive law-enforcement system; the merging of the state with the church; a messianic ideology; an imperial foreign policy; and militarism.\textsuperscript{12}
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Russian rulers have long viewed their European neighbours – and especially Britain, which was seen as the embodiment of liberalism – with deep ambivalence. On the one hand, the rule of law and democratic norms represented a challenge to Russia’s authoritarian state system. On the other hand, England and some other European states have been viewed as a place of refuge for disgraced Russian nobility. (Indeed, it is still viewed as such by members of the Russian elite today.) Even Ivan the Terrible, who grew more concerned about his personal safety toward the end of his reign, not only built stone fortifications in Vologda, but also set his sights on ‘foggy Albion’.

One of the fundamental differences between Russia and the West can be found in their respective answers to the question, who serves whom? Does the state serve the individual, or does the individual serve the state? In the case of Russia, which has long favoured the latter formulation, the centralisation of power has produced a swollen state bureaucracy that has no counterbalance in the form of a strong legislature or judiciary, an independent press or non-governmental organisations. The state is empowered to intervene in every aspect of society, including the personal lives of citizens.

Even now, the Eurasianists or ‘Slavophiles’ regularly criticise the thinking and efforts of Russian liberals and reformers. For instance, in an article published in 2014, Zorkin criticised both the modernisation reforms of prime minister Pyotr Stolypin (1906–11) and the ‘abrupt post-Soviet reforms’ of Boris Yeltsin, saying of the former that ‘Stolypin’s reform took away communal justice from the peasants in exchange for individual freedom, which almost none of them knew how to live and which deprived them of community guarantees of survival’. Likewise, Surkov openly acknowledged in his 2019 article ‘Putin’s Long State’ that:

the multilevel political institutions adopted by us from the West are sometimes considered partly ritual, instituted more so as to be ‘like everyone else’, so that the differences in our political culture would not be so striking to our neighbours, not irritate or frighten them. They are like weekend clothes, in which we visit strangers, while at home we dress in a homely manner, everyone inwardly knows in what.
In another country, Surkov’s remarks might be seen as compromising his boss, but Putin himself has regularly expressed his own nostalgia for what he calls traditional Russian values. In his annual address to the Federal Assembly in December 2012, he proposed ‘to link historical eras and get back to understanding the simple truth that Russia did not begin in 1917, or even in 1991, but rather, that we have a common, continuous history spanning over one thousand years, and we must rely on it to find inner strength and purpose in our national development’.

In June 2019, in an exclusive interview with the Financial Times, he argued that the liberal idea was not just obsolete but harmful to the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population, which in his view wished to preserve its own culture, traditions and family values. Yet very few people in Russia are clear on what these traditional values are, or on what makes them distinctively Russian. According to Putin, ‘Russian society suffers from apparent deficit of spiritual values such as charity, empathy, compassion, support and mutual assistance’. However, these supposedly ‘Russian’ values do not differ much from Christian ones proclaimed around the world. In other speeches, Putin has argued that in Russia there can be no other unifying idea but patriotism, whose ‘roots are so deep and strong that no one has ever succeeded and will not be able to recode Russia, adjust it to other formats’. But how does one determine who is a patriot and who is not? In the Russian Civil War (1917–22) the two largest combatant groups – the Red Army, fighting for the Bolsheviks, and the White Army, which encompassed anyone who opposed the Bolsheviks, especially monarchists – both considered themselves to be patriots.

Dugin, as the chief ideologue of modern Russian Eurasianism, has defined traditional Russian values as Orthodoxy – ‘the domination of the basic religion’; monarchy – ‘the most characteristic form of organisation of a socio-political traditional society, and not only in Russia, but in European countries as well’; and narodnost (nationalism) – ‘the approval of traditional cultural forms of life’. Interestingly, Dugin’s formulation almost perfectly reproduces the famous triad of Count Sergei Uvarov, ‘Orthodoxy, autocracy, narodnost’, which was to become the Russian Empire’s state ideology for decades – up to the October Revolution of 1917. The third attribute in
Uvarov’s triad, narodnost, meant the necessity of following and preserving independent national traditions against foreign influence and rejecting Western revolutionary ideas, such as freedom of thought and rationalism, that were considered by Nicholas I and the Orthodox Church as a threat to the autocratic foundations of the Russian Empire. Uvarov’s triad – a response to revolutionary France’s liberté, égalité, fraternité – is viewed by many scholars as the first ideology of official nationalism aimed at preserving an existing order.21

The intolerance of the Russian state to reform and foreign ideas goes all the way back to the Horde system. The logic of the system was such that removing so much as one brick would destroy the whole building. Any time a ‘weak’ (that is, liberal) leader has come to power in Russia and sought to modernise it, the system has started to fall apart, as demonstrated by Nicholas II, Nikita Khrushchev and Mikhail Gorbachev. Even Yeltsin, the first leader of a democratic Russia, found this out in 1993. Stalin, on the other hand, understood this very clearly, which is why the Iron Curtain was erected to protect the Soviet Union from the ‘harmful influence’ of Western liberalism. Apparently, the post-Soviet elite has also learned this lesson.

Eurasianism as an imperial ideology
Unlike Western empires, which were primarily economic empires focused on draining resources from their overseas possessions, Russian empires have always been military–political in nature, pursuing territorial expansion for the sake of expanding Russia’s security, prestige and international influence. This has long entailed an obsession with secrecy and the idea of an ongoing struggle against external and internal threats that, while partly justified on the basis of bitter historical experience, became over time little more than an excuse to perpetuate the regime and continuously expand the country’s borders.22

The collapse of the Soviet Union was a unique historical event in which an empire fell without any accompanying war, and in highly favourable conditions of international peace, security and cooperation. This opened a window of opportunity for Russia to dispense with the Horde legacy forever and put its imperial past behind it. The triumphal march of Eurasianism in
today’s Russia is, however, evidence that this opportunity has been lost. This failure can be explained by two interrelated phenomena: Russia’s subordination of its need to modernise to its imperial mentality; and the self-fulfilling prophecy that underpinned the West’s policies toward post-Soviet Russia.

In the 1990s, Russian euphoria over the dissolution of the USSR quickly gave way to a sense of loss and defeat as territories that had once been part of the Soviet empire broke free. The Russian leadership struggled to define its relationship with the states of the newly created Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – Moscow could not ignore the problems in its ‘near abroad’, even though its resources for addressing them had shrunk dramatically. A need to tackle concrete problems such as borders, drug trafficking, organised crime and pipeline transit prompted the Russian leadership to establish ‘special relationships’ with CIS states. Furthermore, Russia’s loss of superpower status nudged Russian authorities toward the building of a coalition of satellite countries to boost Russia’s international prestige.

Practically from the moment the CIS was created, Russia’s integration efforts were closely watched by the West, which soon began to fear that a new Russian empire was emerging. Initially, the CIS was seen by the West mainly as a structure for solving the problems of the Soviet nuclear inheritance. After that issue was settled, however, Western leaders began to see centrifugal trends in the CIS as a source of democratisation and a guarantee that the USSR would never be revived. NATO and the European Union sought to push the CIS countries as far away from Russia as possible. This proved to be a counterproductive policy, which confirmed Moscow’s worst fears concerning the West’s goals and fuelled nationalist and revenge-seeking sentiments in Russia. NATO and the EU consistently sidelined the Russian Federation in Eastern Europe, making it suspicious of the West’s intentions in what it still considered its near abroad. The eastward expansion of NATO and the EU against Moscow’s objections, coupled with the ‘shock therapy’ that was applied to the Russian economy, would have severe consequences for Russia’s fledgling democracy. Instead of meddling in Russia’s internal affairs during the 1990s, the West should have tried to create as favourable a security climate as possible for the country’s economic
and political development. Instead, notions of ‘democracy’ and the ‘market economy’ were discredited in Russia. A popular Russian joke at the time observed that ‘everything we were told about communism in the USSR was a lie; everything we were told about capitalism is the truth’.

It is unfortunate that Western leaders did not heed the advice of one of the United States’ most celebrated diplomats, George Kennan, who, in 1951, predicted the eventual downfall of the Soviet empire and offered his opinion on how best to handle a new Russia:

> When Soviet power has run its course, or when its personalities and spirit begin to change … let us not hover nervously over the people who come after, applying litmus papers daily to their political complexions to find out whether they answer to our concept of ‘democratic.’ Give them time; let them be Russians; let them work out their internal problems in their own manner. The ways by which peoples advance toward dignity and enlightenment in government are things that constitute the deepest and most intimate processes of national life.25

It is also regrettable that, even as American and European leaders find much to criticise in Putin’s domestic and foreign policies, they continue to overlook their own mistakes.

As the gulf between Russia and the West has grown wider, nostalgia in Russia for its imperial past has grown stronger. NATO’s military intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999; the West’s recognition of Kosovo’s independence in 2008; Russia’s interference in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008, followed by Moscow’s recognition of their independence; and finally Russia’s incorporation of Crimea, encouragement of armed separatism in Donbas and military intervention in Syria have all served to drive a wedge between Russia and the West. Yet Putin himself, despite remarking in 2005 that the collapse of the Soviet Union was ‘a major geopolitical disaster of the [twentieth] century’ and in 2016 that the Russian border ‘ends nowhere’, has denied that Russia is seeking to rebuild its empire.26 In 2015, after the incorporation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine, Putin said in an interview that:
As for Ukraine and the post-Soviet space in general, I am actually convinced that the position of our Western partners, both European and American, is connected not with protecting the interests of Ukraine, but with an attempt to prevent the revival of the Soviet Union, and no one wants to believe us when we say it is not our goal to restore the Soviet Union.\(^\text{27}\)

Moreover, the Russian leadership has repeatedly – and not unreasonably – emphasised that the West itself is guilty of expansionism through the enlargement of NATO and the EU in Europe, and through the pursuit of regime change outside of Europe.

Modern Eurasianist ideologues, on the other hand, have done much to confirm Western fears. Whatever the official justification for Crimea, the new Eurasianists, many of whom are part of Putin’s inner circle, have their own interpretation of this event. Prokhanov, for instance, has openly called for the restoration of the Russian empire ‘through the complex, slow, but inevitable absorption of those stumps that the voluntarist policies of the corrupt Russian elite implemented in 1991’.\(^\text{28}\) Likewise, Surkov wrote earlier this year that,

Having fallen from the level of the USSR to the level of the Russian Federation, Russia stopped collapsing, began to recover and returned to its natural and only possible state of a great, growing … community of peoples. The immodest role assigned to our country in world history does not allow us to leave the stage or to remain a silent extra, does not promise peace and predetermines the difficult character of our statehood.\(^\text{29}\)

Dugin, not limiting himself to the proposal that Russia should reabsorb only the post-Soviet space, has argued that ‘we need to capture Europe, conquer and incorporate it’.\(^\text{30}\)

The idea of a ‘Greater Eurasia’ with Russia as its central pillar is winning supporters among conservative commentators and scholars, who perceive themselves as being realistic where liberals are overly idealistic. Sergei Karaganov, for instance, who is widely recognised as Putin’s foreign-policy advocate, has argued that Russia has an opportunity to reap political and
economic benefits from spearheading the integration of a rising Asia and a wealthy but crisis-ridden Europe. He has insisted that Russia ‘has a chance to gain a new status, not that of European periphery with possessions in Asia, but as an Atlantic–Pacific power committed to the future, as one of the centers in rising Greater Eurasia’. In an interview with Germany’s Der Spiegel, Karaganov acknowledged that Russians are ‘bad traders’ who do not like economics, but added that they are great fighters and great diplomats. Yet in all this talk of Russia’s advantages and diplomatic acumen there has been little consideration of China’s or India’s attitude toward a Russian-led Eurasia, to say nothing of Japan’s, South Korea’s or the ASEAN nations’. Despite the self-proclaimed realism of Russia’s Greater Eurasia proponents, their ideas seem just as optimistic and fanciful as those they claim to oppose.

Ultimately, the neo-Eurasianist project is the result of a reactionary ideology, a superiority–inferiority complex and phantom-imperial pain. It defines military–political empire as the only form that Russian statehood can take. Russia’s equality with other great powers, and the balance of forces between Russia, China and the US, are seen as more important than multilateral cooperation.

**Eurasianism as an ideology of regional economic integration**

Enthusiasm for Russia’s Eurasian vocation has come at a time of uncertainty concerning the country’s prospects for modernisation. The economic and financial crisis in the West caused Putin to conclude that Russia should no longer solicit modernisation guidance from a weakened EU, which he felt was in no position to lecture other countries on good governance or economic prosperity. The EU’s negative reaction to Putin’s return to the Kremlin in 2012 was a further incentive to pivot to Eurasia. Putin decided that Russia should upgrade its economy by adopting a New Industrialisation Plan based on sophisticated national technologies and a Eurasian Union. The latter was supposed to create a single political, economic, military, customs, humanitarian and cultural space that would become a peer of the EU.

From the very beginning, however, it has not been clear what Russia’s Eurasian project means in practical terms. Does it mean a return to Russia’s traditional imperial model? If not, what is the difference between Soviet...
Eurasianism and the new concept? The Eurasian Union is proposing to serve as a bridge between Europe and the Pacific Rim, but does either Europe or Asia really need such a bridge? After all, China does 6–7 times more trade with the EU than with Russia. As Anton Barbashin and Hannah Thoburn put it, ‘The concept of “Eurasianism,” is based on the contraposition of Russia to the West in the sense of culture, power and existential meaning but does not provide for a unified solution to the problems that the post-Soviet states face’.  

The conflict over Ukraine, which resulted from the clash of two regional strategies, Russia’s Eurasian Union and the EU Eastern Partnership, and the incorporation of Crimea encouraged Minsk and Astana, Russia’s main partners in its Eurasia project, to take a more equidistant position not only on the Ukrainian conflict but on the Eurasian Union itself. Political leaders in Belarus and Kazakhstan have repeatedly stressed that they are in favour of economic integration but strongly against the creation of supranational political structures, and have emphasised that the participants should remain independent, sovereign states. As a result, Putin’s ‘new integration project’ was narrowed down to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which was formalised in 2015. The level of integration in the EAEU – of which Armenia and Kyrgyzstan have also become members, mainly for political reasons – is higher than in the Eurasian Customs Union that preceded it, but lower than in the Russian-proposed Eurasian Union.

Many in Russia and abroad are sceptical about the future of the EAEU, which is viewed as a half-economic, half-political project. All of the EAEU member states have the same problem, which is that they cannot modernise their economies by themselves and need investment and technology from other countries. There is also a big difference between the economic potential of Russia and of the other actual or would-be EAEU participants in Central Asia, which is not conducive to equal relationships among member states. Commitment to the EAEU appears to be low, and the use of trade-protection measures among members appears to be increasing. The free movement of goods remains an elusive goal. Kataryna Wolczuk and Rilka Dragneva have argued that ‘Achieving deep economic integration requires a commitment, mainly from Russia, not only to respect the already adopted
rules of the EAEU but also to spearhead regulatory and institutional modernization of the member states, all of which suffer from poor governance.\textsuperscript{35}

It is true that the success of the EAEU will depend on Russia, but Russia itself suffers from poor governance. The main obstacle to Russia’s economic modernisation is not a lack of investment or advanced technology, but rather the hierarchical nature of its regime, the arbitrariness of its swollen bureaucracy and its lack of democratic institutions. These weaknesses are, in turn, the consequences of more fundamental political and ideological liabilities. The three faces of Russian neo-Eurasianism are reactionary ideology, imperial expansionism and economic integration, but as the first two grow stronger, the third becomes increasingly less likely.

* * *

It is difficult to shake the feeling that Russia, for the fourth time in the last 500 years, is returning to square one. It seems that one of the main features of the ‘Russian soul’ is a tendency to repeat the same mistakes again and again – to fail to learn from the past and to invent all kinds of metaphysical explanations for this vicious circle. Neo-Eurasianism is little more than a crude cover-up for Russia’s political backwardness and bureaucratic arbitrariness. Under the messianic slogan of ‘Greater Eurasia’, it embraces imperial expansionism and alienation from the world’s most advanced, democratic countries. To extract itself from this familiar spiral, the Russian people must forever rid themselves of the Horde system, in all its guises. They must start to view the state not as a shrine, but as a collection of officials, some of them elected, who are employed in the service of the citizenry.

Some contemporary Russian Eurasianists are true believers, but many are cynical opportunists who want to live like Europeans while ruling like medieval Mongols. But the fact is that European living standards and Horde rule are mutually exclusive. Sooner or later, the system’s faults will undermine the well-being of the Eurasian political elite, who will once again face a choice about which model of economic and political development to implement. The way that choice is made could depend a great deal on whether the West itself makes good policy choices with respect to Russia.
Notes


5 Alexander Dugin is a contemporary Russian philosopher and political analyst known for his ultra-right-wing views and ‘conservative nationalism’. He is the leading ideologue of the neo-Eurasianist movement and has close ties with the Russian establishment. Aleksandr Panarin (1940–2003) was a political philosopher who became, during the last ten years of his life, one of the most significant advocates of new Eurasianism. Alexander Prokhanov is a Russian writer, a member of the secretariat of the Writers Union of the Russian Federation and the editor-in-chief of Russia’s extreme-right newspaper Zavtra (Tomorrow), which promotes ultranationalist and neo-imperialist views.


7 Lev N. Gumilev, ‘God rozhdeniya 1380’ [Year of Birth 1380], Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR [Decorative Art of the USSR], no. 12, 1980, p. 36.

8 For more on this history, see Dustin Hosseini, ‘The Effects of the Mongol Empire on Russia’, Geohistory, 12 December 2005, https://geohistory.today/mongol-empire-effects-russia/.


12 Zorkin, ‘Son prava rozhdayet proizvol’.

13 Surkov, ‘Dolgoe gosudarstvo Putina’.

14 Putin, ‘Address to the Federal Assembly’.
and the Development of the Doctrine “Orthodoxy–Autocracy–Nationality”. Note that the contemporary meaning of narodnost implies a mixture of patriotism and nationalism that did not exist in the Russian political vocabulary of the nineteenth century, and therefore is better translated today as ‘nationalism’ rather than ‘nationality’.

22 See Arbatov, ‘Poidet li Rossia na chetvertyi krug?’ , p. 76.


28 ‘Prokhanov: Krym – eto i est..."
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