

The Image of Central Asia: From Eurasianism to Traditional Imperialism

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Russia's policy and perception of Central Asia was interwoven and changed over the course of time. In the beginning of post-Soviet history, Kremlin and most of Russian people had plainly ignored Central Asia, or at least marginalized it. In their minds, Central Asians were imperial leftover, the symbol of the backward Asia and totalitarian USSR which legacy most of the Russians were ready to discard. In their minds, it was this imperial legacy which prevented Russia to join the West symbolized by the USA. Still as time progressed, the disappointment with post-Soviet arrangement grew and this led to emergence of nostalgia for the USSR and ideological/geopolitical arrangements of the past. At that point, Eurasianism became popular. The major reason for the creed's popularity was that Eurasianism was in way of replica of old Soviet ideological arrangements. The point here that Eurasianists proclaimed that people of the former USSR constitute the unique blend/"symbiosis" of ethnicities with Orthodox Russians and Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds constituting the core of Eurasian civilization which look here pretty much as the USSR in disguise. Indeed, the notion of "Eurasian people" look like the notion of "Soviet people". In the context of this theory, the USSR is not presented as the "last empire" which end was unavoidable but a healthy political body killed in way by treacherous or naïve elite – epitomized by Gorbachev – and conniving West, mostly epitomized by the USA. The other important implication of this theory was that nothing is irreversible and the USSR could be resurrected. In this arrangement, Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan, were seen as crucial and natural nucleus for resurrection of the USSR in new form. Eurasianists with Alexander Dugin, as the most prominent representative, look at any problems with Central Asian states, e.g. the rise of Islamism, as the manifestation of the hostility of the USA, the primordial enemy of Eurasia. Eurasianism – following Soviet arrangements – emphasized that Moscow shall be concern only with geopolitical loyalty but not economic implications of the integration. As a matter of fact, Dugin proclaimed that Moscow shall provide the generous economic assistance to geopolitical loyalists including those in Central Asia. This suggested arrangement that is generous economic assistance in exchange for geopolitical loyalty had not been fully implemented by Moscow even in the end of Yeltsin/beginning of Putin's era, when nostalgia for the USSR was quite strong and Eurasianism was undoubtedly quite popular. Even less, Eurasian model of the relationship between Russia and the republics of the former USSR, including those in Central Asia, became viable by the end Putin's presidency. By that time, rising Russian nationalism had led to the new approach to Central Asia. At that point, Russia became not much concern with geopolitical implications or at least they were moved from forefront. Now, Moscow was mostly concerned with economic benefits of its neo imperial presence in the former USSR. And from this perspective, Russian approach became more and more similar to that of the traditional approach of European colonial powers of the late 19th/early 20th centuries. Europeans of that time had no interest in "symbiosis" but in tangible economic benefits, and this what Russia predominately wanted from Central Asia.