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Reassembling Lands or Reconnecting People?
GEOPOLITICS AND BIOPOWER IN RUSSIA'S NEIGHBORHOOD POLICY

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Post-Soviet states tend to view Russian policies toward them through a geopolitical lens, interpreting the approaches as that of a regional power competing for the control of nearby lands. This, however, is only half the picture. Russia's approach to its so-called "near abroad" includes an important refinement: between the geopolitical control of territory and the biopolitical administration of populations. We can better understand this difference by juxtaposing Eurasianism, as a set of geopolitical ideas focused on governing territories, and the "Russian world," as a biopolitical doctrine premised on protecting an imagined transborder community with a common identity.

Contesting realist explanations, I assert that both Eurasianism and the "Russian world" as neighborhood strategies have unfolded beyond the domain of the state, and their proponents prefer to keep a certain distance from the Kremlin. In this memo I explore the policy implications of the geopolitical and biopolitical approaches, the conceptual gaps between them, and the areas of mutual gravitation. I also discuss the implications of the geopolitics-biopolitics nexus for the current crisis in Russian-Ukrainian relations.

The Geopolitics—Biopolitics Nexus

Geopolitics and biopolitics emerged as two key elements of a rather ambiguous Russian policy toward its post-Soviet neighbors. On the one hand, post-Soviet Russian elites tended to view all ideologies as discredited and unnecessary, fueling aversion to the development of ideological constructs. On the other hand, Russian diplomacy understood the need to ground power over neighboring states in something "natural," "objective," and "indisputable." "Civilizational" geopolitics (which treats Russia as a country with a natural sphere of influence) and biopolitics (which emphasizes Russia's

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family-like connection to its "compatriots living abroad") became cornerstones of an allegedly non-ideological but pervasive neighborhood strategy aimed at the reintegration of post-Soviet lands.

With all their differences, both concepts were premised on the incompleteness of the Russian Federation and its incongruence with the idea of a "genuine Russia," which supposedly should be extended beyond its current borders. The two concepts may overlap, as epitomized by the annexation of Crimea and Russia's insistence on spheres of influence under the guise of "Russian world" slogans. Yet they also differ significantly from each other, as I demonstrate below.

Geopolitics and Eurasianism

Most variants of Russia's geopolitical/Eurasianist neighborhood policy share at least four important tenets. First, they are explicitly anti-neoliberal, which makes them especially popular among both conservatives and the left. Second, their common denominator is the perceived fluidity of Russian borders: Eurasianist ideologies portray Russia's borders as movable frontiers rather than as relatively stable instruments for delineating the outside of the country from within. Third, geopolitical thinkers claim that Russia's identification with Europe comes with a high price of submission. Finally, many argue that the only alternative to a Russian sphere of influence throughout the post-Soviet space is military confrontation.

Despite these commonalities, at least two main versions of Eurasianism can be discerned. One is ***normative and ideological*** and associated with Alexander Dugin's anti-universalist doctrine aimed at deconstructing Western hegemony. It contains post-colonial elements (i.e., Russia as forced to submit to the imperial policies of Euro-Atlantic forces) and is close to the leftist critique of the West as a civilization allegedly grounded in racist attitudes toward outsiders. Dugin's geopolitics, however, are not state-centric; his major reference points are civilizations, not nation-states.

A different vision of Eurasianism is grounded in ***geoeconomic*** reasoning. This vision portrays the EU as a colonial power, a politicizing actor that functions beyond economic rationality, while portraying Russia as a state that sets politics and ideology aside for the sake of pragmatism. Russian presidential advisor Sergey Glazyev has even claimed that the main difference between the EU and the Eurasian Union is that the former deprives neighboring countries of their sovereignty while the latter protects it. For Glazyev, Eurasianism is Russia's attempt to challenge the predominance of Euro-Atlantic institutions by forming its own wide bloc of countries, as well as to geopolitically counter-attack by means of enticing Greece, Cyprus, and Hungary to break out of the EU orbit.

Biopolitics and the Genealogy of the Russian World

Biopolitical discourse—even if it comes under other, less academic, names—offers its own language of post-Soviet integration. It provides an overarching platform aimed at reattaching Russian-speaking communities to Russia while re-constituting Russian identity. The key biopolitical metaphor is the family, with its strong Soviet and imperial connotations. Its adherents view the disintegration of the Soviet Union as less a "geopolitical catastrophe," as Vladimir Putin famously dubbed it, than a "biopolitical catastrophe" which turned Russians into a divided nation.

Biopolitics as a concept is much broader than either ethnopolitics or "kinship politics." As I show below, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which has some influence in the realm of biopower, denies that ethnicity is the crucial factor defining the concept of the Russian world. Viacheslav Nikonov, the head of the "Russkiy Mir" foundation established in 2007, claimed a few years later that the whole project is inherently trans-ethnic, since Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Jews can be part of the "Russian world." He underlined the biopolitical core of the concept by arguing that "we need to aggregate people, not lands." Underlining the "objective" and allegedly neutral character of the Russian world, he asserted that "it is about justice and truth, not nationality."

Biopolitics contains strong non-governmental elements. Beyond the state—though in close proximity to it—ideas about the Russian world have been promoted from two dissimilar perspectives: the technocratic (Pyotr Schedrovitsky, Sergey Chernyshov, Sergey Gradirovsky) and the religious (ROC).

The *technocratic* version, popular in the 1990s, was associated with ideas of cosmopolitanism and world-system theory. The concept resonated among the liberal part of the Russian political community, which conceived of the Russian world as part of a global trend toward post-national and territorially-dispersed governance. They saw the Russian world as a global mega-project reattaching the Russian diaspora to Russia and, hence, as part of a globalized world of trans-border mobility, communication, and networking.

Proponents of this idea did not believe in the smooth inclusion of Russia into world civilization, which they viewed as highly competitive and unfriendly. In their view, the strongest global actors would never accept Russia as an equal partner. This stimulated a binary type of thinking: "*they* would make us extensions of themselves." Many policy thinkers believed that Russians were deprived of their "authentic" identity during Soviet times and after. As they perceived the West becoming more sophisticated in its policies, they saw Russians "miserable without a (Russian) World."

Even in this technocratic narrative, the concept became tantamount to empire. In the 1990s, proponents [advocated] less for the construction of a modern nation-state within

Russia's contemporary borders than a "return" to something authentic and "real," a "Russian alternative" (evidently, to the West).

The technocratic reading of the Russian world did not imply territorial expansion, however. Rather, it was akin to the notion of "cultural imperialism." Future conflicts would not be over territory but communication among large agglomerations of people, with the key to success being investment in human capital. This gave the Russian world a humanitarian spin, an element of soft power aimed at producing an attractive "image of the future."

The *religious* vision of the Russian world emanated from the ROC, which claimed that the boundaries of the Russian world coincide with the canonical boundaries of the Church. Geographically, this concept embraces Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus; sometimes Moldova and Kazakhstan are also mentioned. The religious conceptualization assumes that in civilizational terms the "real" Russia is more than the current Russian Federation.

Unlike secular versions of the Russian world, the religious discourse insists that it is not language but Orthodoxy that determines the boundaries. The ROC is also critical of the characterization of the Russian world as a trans-ethnic community, insisting that Russians are a "super-ethnos" that incorporates many other smaller ethnic groups both inside and outside Russia. Finally, the ROC does not agree with the poly-confessional nature of the Russian world, claiming Orthodoxy at its core. This explains why the Russian Muslim community tends to be critical of the "Russian world." Damir Mukhetdinov, deputy chairman of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia, has dubbed it a proto-ideology that is constitutionally questionable and disrespectful to Russia's Muslim population.

As a key element of its neighborhood policy, Russia includes in the sphere of "biopolitical care" categories of people like pensioners and Second World War veterans who live outside the country; migrants from Armenia who receive the same labor rights as Russian citizens; and students from eastern Ukraine who compete on an equal footing with Russian students for university admission. At the same time, the policies of "biopolitical care" are conducive to the Russian incorporation of certain territories, as evidenced by the annexation of Crimea and the close integration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In all its versions, biopolitics is a strategy ultimately aimed at redefining extant borders. It thus plays a political role, even if this is refuted by promoters. Biopolitical borders shape the dynamics of inclusion in—and exclusion from—Russia as a political community with shifting territorial contours.

At the same time, the biopolitical strategy also contains strong exclusionary elements. It reduces the importance of wide swathes of Central Asia and the South Caucasus where

the ethnically Russian population is statistically miniscule and cannot constitute a viable political resource. Russia's support for the military insurgency in Ukraine on behalf of the "Russian world" also demonstrated how the concept could negatively impact the implementation of the Eurasian project, as it tempered the enthusiasm of the Belarusian and Kazakh leaders for the Eurasian Union.

The Crisis in Russia-Ukraine Relations: Geopolitics and Biopower

Territorial politics can go biopolitical, while biopolitics can evolve into land grabs. This is what the war in Ukraine has illustrated: the biopolitics of the Russian world merging with the geopolitical seizure of territory (and war).

The intertwining of humanitarian care and territorial appropriation reveals the coercive dimension of biopolitics due to the Kremlin interpretation of the Russian world as a matter of "political choice" between staying in or out, with a severe reaction reserved for those who opt for the latter. The projection of an either-or logic of political distinction onto Ukraine triggered war and inevitably refocused attention from caring for people to legitimizing mass killing within territories that the adherents of the Russian world considered to be rightfully theirs. This coercive dimension of biopolitics was clearly articulated by Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin's claim that "civil war gives birth to people with a [more] civil position."

The crisis in Ukraine triggered the overt politicization of biopolitical and geopolitical discourses. In the biopolitical realm, this was illustrated by the devolution of the "Russkiy Mir" foundation from a model based on similar European institutions (like the Alliance Francaise, the British Council, the Goethe Institute, and the Cervantes Institute) to a militant advocate for a specific set of state policies. Nikonov rejected his previous assurance that "Ukraine was formed as an independent nation" in favor of promoting the recognition of the "independence" of eastern Ukrainian provinces. His interpretation of the Euromaidan revolution as a declaration of war on Russia and the government in Kyiv as "assassins of its own people" clearly demonstrates the possibilities for politicizing and radicalizing the concept of the Russian world.

The same goes for geopolitics. The crisis in Ukraine pushed many Eurasianist proponents into the radical nationalist opposition. For example, Mikhail Delyagin has spoken about the "obvious failure of Russian policy toward Ukraine," manifested in his view by the Kremlin's de facto support of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's "Nazi regime." Dugin praised Putin for the annexation of Crimea but lambasted him for hesitating to intervene militarily in eastern Ukraine. He claims that Putin faces the challenge of transforming Russia from an (economically motivated) "state–corporation" to a full-fledged "state–civilization" capable of putting an end to Western hegemony and openly acknowledges that to achieve this transition Russia must be ready for real war.

Meanwhile, the religious discourse, which is typically supportive of state policy, has moved in a different direction. Its adherents view the crisis in Ukraine as "incomprehensible," necessitating "only prayer." The symbolic absence of the Patriarch at the ceremony incorporating Crimea into Russia may be interpreted as a sign of his disappointment with the way Putin has used the idea of the Russian world. The ROC made clear that it does not take sides and that it has representatives on both sides of the conflict. In his message to president-elect Poroshenko, Patriarch Kirill characterized Ukraine as an "inheritor and protector of the testaments of the great prince Vladimir who baptized Russia….During my visits to Ukraine I have seen everywhere the best of Christian traditions." In this view, Ukraine is not a country whose deviation from the Russian world represents a challenge to Moscow but rather the most authentic incarnation of Orthodoxy. At the same time, while speaking about the conflict in Ukraine, the Patriarch emphasized the necessity of preserving the unity of Russia itself—a sign of disapproval of Russia's territorial expansion.

Still, the ROC has failed to stay out of politics. It sees the origins of the conflict in the political activity of Western Ukrainian Greek Catholics. In the ROC's interpretation, Western Ukrainians were instrumental in instigating inter-ethnic clashes, which reached their zenith during the Euromaidan. Emulating the Kremlin's discourse, the ROC portrays Ukrainian Greek Catholics as former collaborators of Nazi Germany. It also links the Euromaidan with developments in the Middle East, a chain of events allegedly aimed at fostering instability along Russia's borders.

Conclusion

Russia's neighborhood policies are a blend of Eurasianism and Russian world doctrines. This widens Russia's policy toolkit by means of combining geopolitical strategies with the biopolitical care of populations beyond Russia's borders. The problem, clearly elucidated by the war in Ukraine, is that both doctrines are prone to radicalization and militarization. Geopolitical reasoning easily evolves from calculating Russian resources and advantages in the "near abroad" to militarily conquering parts of neighboring states, while biopolitics shifts from protecting the linguistic rights of Russian speakers to enforcing a family-type of union with post-Soviet nations. As the annexation of Crimea made clear, it is the combination of geopolitical and biopolitical instruments that Russia has used to redefine its borders, triggering security dangers for the entire Euro-Atlantic region.