

THE NEW DIMENSIONS OF RUSSIA'S GEOPOLITICAL CODE

The debate of whether Russia belongs to the European civilization has been a long-running one. Russian elites have traditionally held that Russia should follow the European track of development, while the masses have held rather anti-Western views. Currently we are seeing sea changes in how the Russian elite view Russia's geopolitical code. In foreign policy, the regional dimension is getting ahead of the global one, while the pro-Western sentiment is reversing. It is now the first time the political elite in Russia has taken the same stance as the majority of the population and is playing the anti-Western card as leverage in domestic policies. This article analyzes the evolution of Russia's geopolitical code over the last two decades and identifies the reasons for this shift. The article also analyzes the factor of European consciousness, concluding that, failing to accept Russia, Turkey, and Israel as equal partners of the West and its outposts in advancing Western values, Europe shrank back to the mental frontiers of the Middle Age.

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One of the key indicators of a country's position in global affairs and its foreign policy trends is the geopolitical code. Colin Flint –a political geographer– defines it as the manner in which a country orientates itself towards the world,¹ while Vladimir Kolosov –another professor of political geography– stresses that the code is a set of strategic assumptions of a government about other governments in shaping its foreign policy.²

A country's geopolitical code takes shape through answering these five questions:

- Who are our current and potential allies?
- Who are our current and potential enemies?
- How can we maintain our allies and nurture potential allies?
- How can we counter our current enemies and emerging threats?
- How do we justify the four calculations above to our public, and to the global community?³ (This is becoming the key question in the world today).

Any geopolitical code has two main variables: namely, scale and orientation. The history of Russia is a history of its exponentially increasing geopolitical ambitions: from the 15th century feudal Muscovy to the landlocked centralized state at the times of Ivan the Terrible, from Peter the Great's burgeoning sea power to a supreme colonial empire of the early 20th century. By the end of World War II, the Soviet Union and the U.S. had evolved from regional powers into global powers and shaped the bipolar system of international relations.

With the collapse of the USSR, Russia had to choose between a global strategy –for which it clearly lacked both military and economic resources– and a regional one, which was out of tune with its ambitions. As political scientist Thomas Volgy put it, present-day Russia enjoys an overachiever major power status, i.e. its recognized global status is not backed by appropriate resources, and its potential influence upon the global agenda remains mostly insignificant.⁴

Russia's geopolitical code has always stirred fierce debate among Russian intellectuals. After calling itself the successor to the Byzantine Empire (“the Third Rome”), a hub of Eastern Christianity, Russia set its own evolution path against that of Western Europe and made everybody question to what extent it belongs

1 Colin Flint, *Introduction to Geopolitics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 43.

2 Vladimir Kolosov and Nikolay Mironenko, *Geopolitics and Political Geography* (in Russian) (Moscow, Aspect Press, 2001), pp. 125-133

3 Peter Taylor and Colin Flint, *Political Geography: World-Economy, Nation-State, and Locality* (Essex: Prentice-Hall, 2000).

4 Thomas J. Volgy et al. (eds.), *Major Powers and the Quest for Status in International Politics: Global and Regional Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 242.

to European civilization and whether it should follow the European track of development or choose its own unique way instead. Although most Russians have always held rather anti-Western views, the discussion never involved anyone else apart from the intellectuals, as the establishment wanted Russia to be seen as part of Europe and mostly navigated the country along the European track. Even in the Soviet times the elite absorbed the Western ideology of communism but would still set Russia in opposition to imperialism and capitalism rather than the West, suggesting, in fact, an alternative way for what they believed was Western society.

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Right now, however, we are seeing sea changes in how the Russian elite view the geopolitical code. In foreign policy, the regional dimension is getting ahead of the global one, while the pro-Western sentiment is reversing. It is the first time the political elite has taken the same stance as the majority of the population and is playing the anti-Western card as the key means of leverage in its domestic policies.

With every new term in office, a Russian president adopts a new foreign policy concept. If you look at the four recent ones, the shift in geopolitical positioning is obvious. Putin’s first strategy of the early 2000s was completely West-oriented. In his remarkable speech to the German Bundestag, the new leader said that Russia had made its choice, and the choice was a European one. But it was not long before the search for a new, special “Russian way” started. The next strategy posed Russia as an oil and gas superpower. The one that followed made foreign policy a tool for modernization. Finally, Putin’s most recent foreign policy doctrine issued in February 2013 directly aims at strengthening national sovereignty, which is seen as a means of systemic opposition to the West. During Putin’s third term, Russia has embarked on a pragmatic and tough *realpolitik* course.

The tough anti-Western rhetoric started as a campaign against foreign non-governmental organizations that were accused of trying to affect domestic policies and financing the opposition, and continued as a public campaign against public officials’ accounts and property abroad. The Russian elite removed its enlightened pro-European guise to fully embrace popular traditionalism and anti-Western ideology. Russia’s establishment and population together started rejecting the West – a trend which at times degenerates into mere obscurantism.

So what are the reasons for this U-turn? One obvious reason has to do with the present-day political landscape and power balance. With the opposition movement and mass manifestations on the rise in Moscow in winter 2011/12, Vladimir Putin had to find an instrument to consolidate the establishment. Appealing to traditionalism, along with building the image of an outside enemy in popular consciousness, helped him to bring together a broad spectrum of anti-liberal social forces in Russia. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Putin dubbed the new political movement “All-Russia People’s Front”, which is supposed to be an umbrella coalition uniting the social strata that support him. In fact, after losing the support of liberal forces, Putin went from a national leader who stood above the political struggle and sought to balance the left and the right-wingers, traditionalists, and Westerners, to a conservative right-center politician who bases his policy on the majority’s decisions, and depends on that majority.

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However, this was only a minor reason behind the U-turn in Russia’s foreign policy. The next set of reasons has to do with the Russian political and diplomatic elite’s “frustration” over the actions of the West in the early 2000s. Difficult as it may be to picture now, after 9/11, when Vladimir Putin suggested a strategic partnership to fight a common enemy, the idea of Russia’s accession to NATO was seriously discussed. If this path had been realized, it could have changed the world. Russia’s technical

accession to the alliance would have been impossible, as it would have meant a major review of NATO, first and foremost what it viewed as potential threats and ways to counter these threats – which is a process that the Alliance needs to undergo, is attempting to, but has yet to complete. A joint Western front from Vladivostok to Seattle could have reacted differently to all the regional threats: from North Korea to Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya to Cuba and Venezuela.

However, according to the Russian elite, their outstretched hand of help was not accepted – or rather, while the West agreed to accept the assistance, it would not say “yes” to an equal partnership. The foreign policy of an overachieving superpower builds on symbolical capital –and Russia was asking for symbolical formalization of the new partnership– which, eventually, never took shape. An illusionary line between East and West still looms large in the European consciousness and prevents

Europe from seeing Russia as a friend. The West chose a different way: instead of playing games with Russia, it took advantage of its weakness and broke the pledge it shared with Mikhail Gorbachev during the reunification of Germany: NATO would not move a mile to the east of the German-Polish border. This realistic choice, however, proved short-sighted. Though Europeans opted for a tactical expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, they lost a historic chance to launch a full-scale strategic advancement eastwards by including Russia into the orbit of influence of the European civilization. Yet, we should admit that at times inconsistent, –especially when it came to the choice of friends– Russian diplomacy could not have commanded the necessary trust of its partners in the West.

The West made a similar strategic mistake by doubting to admit Turkey to the European Union. Too absorbed in trying to define where the borders of the European civilization lie, in petty fights over strategically less significant issues of, say, Northern Cyprus, Europeans seem to have already missed the opportunity to include Asia Minor into the orbit of European identity and obtain (though with no guarantee of success) a key ally in their struggle against Islamic fundamentalism. Europe's tough pro-Palestinian policy discouraged one more beacon of European identity and European ally in the Middle East: Israel.

Failing to accept Russia, Turkey, and Israel as equal partners of the West and its outposts in advancing Western values, Europe shrank back to the mental frontiers of the Middle Age. We might as well be a mere footstep away from the sunset of the European civilization; but rather than dying altogether, it is giving up on its global ambitions. The age-old way of spreading European ideals must have exhausted itself at the beginning of the 21st century. Europe has made itself a nice little home within the biggest peninsula of Eurasia and stuck to it.

But this is not the ultimate geopolitical reason. Once turned down, Russia and Turkey looked for a different, non-European basis for their identity – one that they did not take long to find: some in their appeal to Islam, others in Eurasianism. Eurasianism, as an ideology of Russia's unique geopolitical way, was articulated back in the 1920s and 1930s by Russian émigré aristocracy who had fled from the Bolshevik regime to Eastern Europe. The Eurasian geopolitical code locates Russia in North-Eastern Eurasia, as an island surrounded by civilizations that are totally dissimilar to it and sustaining its power through fostering intracontinental relations in the post-Soviet space. Though geographically simple and available, Eurasian ideas have so far been criticized due to their vague social and ethical basis. European values of personal and market freedom have demonstrated increasing progress in achieving economic and social prosperity, while Russian national unity as part of the opposing Eurasianism looks like a mere utopia.

While Western Europe is evolving new levels of liberal social values, it is unaware of how the perception in the rest of the world of “European civilization” is being affected. The perception from the non-Western world about changes in the West is as follows: welfare state that is falling hostage to the have-nots and undermining the drive for personal fulfillment, uncontrolled multiculturalism, erosion of the nuclear family and traditional gender roles, aggressive emancipation of homosexuals, violent social secularism, and ethical relativism are all becoming an integral part of Western life. Whereas previously Western values used to be regarded as an established truth and key to prosperity, now they are increasingly seen by many non-Europeans as a crisis of Western liberal ideology.

Up until now Russia saw itself as “not quite European” – but it never questioned that progress depends on living in accordance to Western values. However, above-mentioned “Western values” that the Russian society does not feel at ease with, enables the political elite to build a new conservative ideology based on the idea of a detrimental Western path and the need to appeal to Russia’s own spiritual legacy.

Vladimir Putin focused his recent big speech to the Russian Parliament on building these spiritual foundations: “Russian society suffers from apparent deficit of spiritual values such as charity, empathy, compassion, support, and mutual assistance.” – he said. “We must wholeheartedly support the institutions that are the carriers of traditional values, which have historically proven their ability to pass these values from generation to generation. The law can protect morality and should do so, but a law cannot instill morality. We must secure a firm spiritual and moral foundation for our society.”⁵

But the deliberately deepened ideological split between Russia and the West is not the main reason behind the anti-Western turn of Russia’s political elite. The finishing touch is the leadership ambitions of the Russian President, his desire to go down in history forever, which may have driven his choice to take another term in office. Consolidation of society on an anti-Western and anti-opposition platform, tense relations with both the U.S. and Europe, and the crisis of liberal social values all create the conditions to implement Putin’s paramount messianic idea: a revival of the common Eurasian space, which used to be a geopolitical niche for the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The Eurasian Union is taking shape under new conditions and following new models. Rather than a colonial empire, this is a flexible, mutually acceptable project that yields economic and integration benefits. With the West spiraling into a crisis, this is an attempt to

5 Vladimir Putin, “Address to the Federal Assembly,” *President of Russia*, 12 December 2012, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/4739>

suggest an alternative model of social, economic and, most importantly, spiritual and civilizational development – which is a colossal undertaking.

It is noteworthy that the establishment of a Customs Union is not the first attempt to build a regional integration group in Eurasia. Over the last few decades, there have been quite a number of overlapping structures, including the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization, EURASEC, the Common Economic Space, the Union State of Russia and Belarus, and many more. With all this in mind, it may look as if the Customs Union were yet another attempt at regional integration. However, the Eurasian Economic Union, which is to be launched in 2015, is miles ahead of the past attempts and the Customs Union, which it is built on.

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First, while previous integration projects brought on a fear of Russian colonization because they also involved harmonizing language, culture, and historical path, the present-day integration project is mostly based on economic arguments and economic benefits for those involved. Moreover, after Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), one can be sure that all the regional trade and customs practices will be in line with global standards. Over the first year, the turnover in the Customs Union grew by 40 percent, while over the first two years, it doubled. Take Ukraine: its choice between the Eurasian and the European Union is quite a pragmatic one, as it will gain nine billion dollars in export revenues with the former and lose one and a half billion dollars with the latter due to asymmetric trade terms.

Another novelty in Russia's Eurasian policy is forsaking its ambition to make regional integration all-encompassing. Similar to the European model, Eurasian integration is becoming “multi-level and multi-speed”.

Now where does the line between temporary political trends and the change in the geopolitical code lie? Why are we talking about a shifting code rather than fluctuation due to a whole range of temporary reasons? The change in the geopolitical code has taken place at different speeds over different periods. For instance, the rigid

bipolar system made the geopolitical code relatively stable due to the existence of two coalitions of universal nature – in other words, any given country would rely on the opinion of either the USSR or the U.S. as a leader of one of the coalitions. That restricted attempts to change the geopolitical code: potential allies and enemies were determined by the very structure of the bipolar world.

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After the disintegration of the USSR, the geopolitical code has grown more potentially dynamic. There are at least two reasons for this. First, coalitions have ceased to be stable and universal. In today’s increasingly complex world we live in an era of *ad hoc* coalitions. Countries join different alliances on a temporary basis: Russia mainly supports the U.S. in its Afghanistan campaign, but was against the war in Iraq. These flexible coalitions also do not have a comprehensive nature. For example, Norway backs the EU in defense but does not join the Union.

Coalitions are forged to meet a specific objective, hence their *ad hoc* nature. In these circumstances, a country feels free to choose its allies and rivals of its own accord. Besides, to a certain extent it can manipulate some countries, coming up as an ally in some instances and as a rival in others. All of this is making the geopolitical code less stable and more exposed to bifurcations, as well as putting forward the symbolic side of this positioning.

The second reason for the present-day dynamic geopolitical code is a dramatic increase in the number of international stakeholders. Previously, global politics used to be a prerogative exclusive to states. At present, however, the number of their competitors is growing exponentially. Internationally, states have to face and negotiate with multinational corporations, insurgent movements, pirates, terrorist groups and so on. Even a prominent public figure can become a standalone global politics stakeholder (e.g. George Soros). One could say that each of the above has their own sets of allies and rivals and a specific way to choose both, therefore, each has a unique geopolitical code. However, while a geopolitical code of a state is based on sovereignty and internal legitimacy, which makes it less flexible, the codes of non-governmental actors are extremely flexible.

If it were not for two factors, the change in Russian foreign policy could be referred to as a fluctuation rather than a change of geopolitical code: first, an increasingly fast change in the geopolitical code and second, deeper ideological reasons for Russia's "divorce" with the West. One can assume that there are both longer and shorter stages to the shifting of the geopolitical code. The shorter ones depend on *ad hoc* coalitions that engage a multitude of international stakeholders. But the longer ones stem from fundamental factors, first and foremost from ideological or civilizational connections between allies or rivals. In this particular case, it is the new Western values, as well as the failure to understand or accept them in Russia, that have laid the groundwork for a new longer stage of the shifting of geopolitical code.

These are the reasons that made Russia's geopolitical code go from pro-Western to anti-Western and from global to regional. With all this in mind, the world of tomorrow might be an arena for equal regional rivals: Europe, Russia, the Muslim world, China, Brazil, and India with a transition period of U.S. dominance over these powers. This "one-and-a-half-polar" world (with one pole being the U.S. and a number of regional half-poles) will not bring the peoples of the Earth any more peace or prosperity.



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