

Introduction

The disintegration of the Soviet Union¹ not only gave rise to new independent states, a process of historic importance, but also formed the beginning of their integration into new geopolitical spaces. These spaces had their own geographical contours even within the former Soviet Union. This was reinforced by the economic zoning of the Soviet state on the basis of the administrative-territorial structure of the former U.S.S.R.² Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia together were called “Pribaltika”; Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia were known as the “Trans-Caucasus”; while Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan together formed “Sredniaia Azia” or Middle Asia. These also defined specific economic regions of the U.S.S.R. Kazakhstan was sometimes viewed as part of “Sredniaia Azia,” even though it was normal practice to discuss the Kazakh economic region separately because of its relatively large size.

It comes as no surprise that the independence and sovereignty of these states raised the question of finding new names for these geopolitical spaces – names that would better highlight their newly acquired status in relation to Moscow. In fact, certain publications (mainly by Russian authors) still use the names inherited from the imperial era.³ Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia

¹ For example, Victor Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009); Robert Service, *A History of Modern Russia: From Tsarism to the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 467-507.

² For example, Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 145-186.

³ The best example of this is the Russian translation of Zbigniew Brzezinski’s *The Grand Chessboard*, in which the term “Central Asia” (Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), pp. 46-47, 93, 95, 113, 121, 129-130, 131, 145, 150) is nearly everywhere translated into Russian not as “Tsentral’naia Azia” (as it should be) but as “Sredniaia Azia” (Middle Asia) (Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Velikaia shakhmatnaia doska. Gospodstvo Ameriki i ego strategicheskie imperativy* [The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnoshenia Publishers, 2005), pp. 61-62, 116-117, 137, 146, 155-158, 175, 180); in the same vein “the three Caucasian countries” and “the

have deemed it necessary to drop the term “Pribaltika” as a “Soviet holdover” in favor of the current “Baltic countries.” Today, the terms “Southern Caucasus” and “Central Asia” (which includes Kazakhstan) have essentially ousted the old terms “Trans-Caucasus” (the term “Central Caucasus” has become increasingly popular in the scientific literature in recent years) and “Sredniaia Azia” (Middle Asia).

Recently the relatively new geopolitical term “Central Eurasia” has been gaining currency. It has been normally applied to the eight states of the Central Caucasus (often referred to as South Caucasus) and Central Asia, which are treated as a single geopolitical space. However, this is not completely correct from the geopolitical viewpoint since it still reflects the Russian idea of this geopolitical expanse.

The purpose of this study is to re-examine some aspects of the geopolitical-economic understanding of the region that encompasses the above-mentioned countries through a descriptive approach, that is, irrespective of the interests that motivate the world and other countries in this region.

This study of geopolitical and geo-economic problems in Central Eurasia is carried out on the basis of geographic and historical descriptions of this region. It presents a critical analysis of most popular geopolitical theories of “Eurasianism,” “the Heartland,” and “the Rimland.” The first, as we know, is the main trend of the time-honored Russian geopolitical school. The other two were elaborated by well-known academic geopoliticians, the Englishman Halford Mackinder and the American Nicholas Spykman respectively. These theories seem to have found renewed attention today. This can be argued in the context of the increasingly aggressive nature of Russia’s actions toward its immediate neighbors, the former Soviet republics (for example, the war on Georgia and the gas conflict with Ukraine), and toward the West as a whole.⁴ The Heartland theory has been activated as an antidote to Russia’s imperial ambitions. Nevertheless, this theory completely disregards

three states of the Caucasus” (Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, pp. 122, 125) are translated, correspondingly, as “tri zakavkazskie (trans-Caucasian) strany” and “tri zakavkazskikh gosudarstva” (Brzezinski, *Velikaia*, pp. 148, 152).

⁴ For example, Arkady Dubnov, “Russia: How will Moscow Behave in a Multi-Polar World,” *Eurasia Insight*. *Eurasianet*, October 7, 2008, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav100708a.shtml>>.

the interests of those countries over which the most diverse plans for extending the Russian empire, or at least increasing Russia's influence, are being developed and partially implemented.

Researchers are addressing to an even lesser extent the question of what the Central Eurasian states themselves want. Do they want to be sovereign democratic states with a market economy, or would they prefer to be under the patronage of a particular nation that is interested in retaining its influence at all costs in these countries?

It is extremely important for the region's countries to be aware of the objectives the world and regional actors are pursuing in this region. This will make it easier for them to find their bearings and know what kind of relations to build with their external partners. At the same time, the rest of the world would know somehow what goals the Central Eurasian states are pursuing.

In this study, the authors share their assessments and views of the current geopolitical and geo-economic state of Central Eurasia and of the possible ways both the entire region and the individual countries belonging to it might develop. They re-examine many well-known theoretical constructs and offer a new concept, "Central Caucasus-Asia." Understanding that many of the issues raised in this study are essentially disputable, the authors welcome a constructive and substantive debate on the topic.

Eldar Ismailov is the author of the second section of the first chapter "Transformation of the Geopolitical Space of Eurasia," the third chapter "The Heartland Theory and the Present-Day Geopolitical Structure of Central Eurasia," and the "Appendix. Evolution of Central Eurasia in Different Imperial Systems." Vladimir Papava is the author of the first section of the first chapter "The Geographic and Geopolitical Contours of Eurasia and Central Eurasia," and the second chapter "Eurasianism and the Concept of Central Caucasus-Asia." Finally, both are authors of the "Introduction" and "Key Findings and Conclusion" to this Monograph.