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‘Europe’s Problem’: Contested Political Regions and Eurasia

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Kazakhstan’s president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, set a cat among a few pigeons last month with his remarks about relocating Ukraine peace talks from Minsk to Astana. Apparently responding to a suggestion from US president Donald Trump that negotiations should be held in a new location, Nazarbayev claims to have said: ‘Let’s have them in Kazakhstan, like it was supposed to be in the beginning.’ While it remains unlikely that new talks on the Donbas war will begin in Central Asia, Trump’s purported willingness to countenance the idea says something about shifting perceptions of regional boundaries since November 2013. That is, since the former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych suspended the process of concluding an Association Agreement with the European Union – prompting protests, his ousting and war.

Ukraine as ‘Europe’s problem’

Both the location and the countries that participate in talks subtly shape the imagination of those outside Ukraine about the political region the country belongs to. Europe in its geographical sense stretches to the Ural Mountains and encloses the densely populated part of Russia, while nudging Kazakhstan across a mental boundary into Asia. Yet politically the region of Europe has come to be associated with the European Union. This tendency was apparent long before the current tensions between Russia and Western capitals. It was fostered by the softening of borders between members and neighbours and by the application of EU governance across external borders, although the refugee crisis of recent years has gone some way to reversing the former trend.

Many had internalised this open-ended image of a political European region. On the campaign trail in 2015, vying to become the Republican Party nominee, Trump described Crimea as ‘Europe’s problem.’ He asked why Germany was not taking a lead role in resolving the crisis. The off-the-cuff remark showed the extent to which Germany was pivotal to Trump’s internalised political image of Europe.

> Earlier, while protesters packed the Maidan in Kyiv in late 2013 and early 2014, it was clear that EU leaders saw Ukraine as a European problem too.

Having backed the protesters in Kyiv, EU leaders invested efforts in the first, unsuccessful, Minsk protocol, striving to bring a stop to the war in Donbas. Collective EU commitment to Ukraine struggled but persisted. Sanctions, first imposed following Russia’s annexation of Crimea, were repeatedly extended and eventually a revised EU-Ukraine Association Agreement came in to full force in July 2017. At the beginning of 2018, as EU states focus on internal challenges, Ukraine slips further down the agenda; attention to the situation in Donbas has noticeably faded in recent months.

Ukraine as ‘Eurasia’s problem’

Europe’s ‘ends’ – both spatially and politically – are pondered by the scholar Kalypso Nicolaidis in the conclusion of a 2014 volume. [i] She asks whether we want a Europe (identified with the EU) that is bounded or unbounded, and whether its membership should be inclusive or exclusive. A bounded, exclusive version of political Europe seems to be in the ascendancy. If the EU comes to define political Europe, then in a similar vein ‘Eurasian’ regional organisations are shaping our conception of political Eurasia. And Eurasia, as used by journalists and commentators, is clearly not coextensive with the geographical landmass. ‘Eurasian integration’ implies a political Eurasia with the EU outside.

Russia’s president Vladimir Putin outlined his vision of the Eurasian Economic Union in late 2011. It is significant that, despite patent differences between Russia and other European states in the years before the Ukraine crisis, the 2013 iteration of Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept still described the country as ‘an integral and inseparable part of European civilisation.’ The comparable passages in the 2016 iteration – written against the backdrop of NATO-Russia tensions – instead invoked separate ‘European and Eurasian regions.’

In certain respects, the location for Ukraine talks matters. However closely aligned Belarus is to Russia, EU leaders still view Belarus as part of the European region. Moreover, Belarus’s leader persistently emphasises Belarus’s European location.

Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s comment to EU Commissioner Johannes Hahn on 30 January 2018 was typical: ‘Our country is situated in the very heart, the very centre of Europe.’

> There is consonance with the idea of Ukraine as European too, and thus continuity with the earlier political imagination of the region.

By contrast, Kazakhstan strikes a dissonant note – drawing attention to its non-Europeanness. It follows that EU leaders would probably not embrace a relocation of talks.

The Astana proposals on Ukraine, unlikely though they are, imply rather more than this though. The Minsk talks have involved France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine – the so-called Normandy Format – with the United States in the background. If Trump were to endorse the idea, it might be interpreted as signalling a willingness to revise the Normandy Format too. The Trump administration’s interest in Ukraine seems to be intensifying. In late December the US agreed to sell weapons to the Ukrainian government, more recently it has responded to Russia’s calls for a UN peacekeeping mission by tabling its own proposals, and recently it imposed new sanctions on Russian companies and individuals in respect of Ukraine.

Enter the dragon

The interdependence of the former Soviet states explains the tendency to persevere with the notion of a post-Soviet space (where ‘space’ might look like a synonym for political region). On the one hand, Belarus and Ukraine were part of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, though, they have long been conceived as a geopolitical fault line. For Samuel Huntington, a civilizational fault line cut through the two countries, marking the boundary between Western and Eastern Christianity that could be dated back to prior to the Reformation.

The mental map of Europe and Asia with ‘a post-Soviet space’ in between has long seemed anachronistic. Today ‘Eurasia’ as a political region looms larger in the imagination even if the dynamic between Russia and China remains unclear: does Eurasia occupy the political space between Europe and Asia? Or does Eurasia include Asia? In any case, Central Asia is crucial to the redrafting of our mental maps. However incidental Nazarbayev’s suggestion, the counterfactual is worth reflection. Moving talks to Astana would subconsciously push Ukraine slightly further away from being imagined as a political part of Europe by those outside the country. Instead it remains part of an as-yet-poorly-defined political Eurasian region; that is, the restrictive notion of Eurasia that excludes the EU; a post-Soviet Eurasia.

The EU’s real problem is if its eastern frontier comes to be defined as the Eurasian frontier. Uncertain where its own political periphery is, the EU itself risks becoming peripheral; a contested ‘space’ between China and the USA.

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[i] Kalypso Nicolaidis 2014, ‘Europe’s Ends’ in Claudia Wiesner and Meike Schmidt-Gleim (eds.), *The Meanings of Europe: Changes and Exchanges of a Contested Concept* (Routledge: London and New York)

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