Commentary No. 61
January 19, 2024

Is Eurasianism a Monolithic Construct?

Dr. Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun

Summary

Eurasianism, as a very dynamic idea, constantly develops and renews itself and there is not and cannot be a single standardized concept of Eurasianism.

Eurasia is a portmanteau word expressing the land mass of two continents named Asia and Europe by the ancient Greeks. It is a fictional fusion of two conventionally named continents, which stands for an abstract idea that can be considered a concept. In terms of surface area, while Asia corresponds to one-third of the Earth's land mass, Europe is the second smallest continent in the world after Australia. The land mass of Asia is four times larger in area than Europe. Although there is no clear geographical or geological boundary to the east of the European continent, common knowledge has traditionally held that the east of Europe is separated from Asia by the Ural Mountains, the Ural River, and the Caucasus Mountains, and to the southeast by the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. Pursuant to this general understanding, the Mediterranean Sea separates Europe from Africa in the south. Europe's western borders are defined by the Atlantic Ocean and in the north by the Polar Sea.

Eurasianism as an intellectual construct

Eurasianism, on the other hand, is a construct developed wisely by Russian intellectuals that essentially represents a socio-political movement that challenged the supremacy of Eurocentric thought at the beginning of the 20th century. This challenge is also a multi-purpose intellectual process that has since offered a way of defining Russia's place in world politics.

Which of the above two aims – challenging Eurocentric thinking or defining Russia's international role – is the main starting point of Eurasianism? The conventional answer to this question has always stressed the latter. However, what makes Eurasianism internationally interesting and important is the straightforward approach that intellectually questions the Eurocentric understanding and imposition of the early 20th

century. Setting aside this intellectual challenge against Eurocentrism and limiting the meaning of Eurasianism only to determining the future of Russia's domestic policy and its place in world politics does not increase the international value of the concept.

At this point, it is necessary to mention the thoughts of the Russian intellectual Nikolai Sergeyevich Trubetzkoi. It was him who posed the question about non-European thinking in the most striking way in the essay he published in a manifesto in 1920. Titled *Europe and Mankind*, the essay, even though it does not refer to Eurasianism by name, has a proto-Eurasianist nature.

Trubetzkoi dwelled on chauvinism and cosmopolitanism. He asserted that Europeans held a fairly large variety of positions regarding nationalism, but they all were on a spectrum between two extremes: chauvinism on one side and cosmopolitanism on the other. Trubetzkoi perceived cosmopolitanism as the chauvinism of Romano-Germanic values and argued that Romano-Germanic nations saw themselves as representatives of the civilization. In this context, European cosmopolitanism is pan-Romano-Germanic chauvinism, which is founded on unconscious prejudice and the egocentric mentality about the Romano-Germanic people and their culture being superior to the others.

> In his essay, Trubetzkoi explained in a critical manner that the Romano-Germans belittled the peoples who were outside their value judgments by calling them "barbarians."

He also maintained that they saw themselves as militarily quite powerful, but in fact, those despised "barbarians" destroyed the Romano-Germans many times. He stated, therefore, that this understanding of superiority does not reflect reality. Trubetzkoi also criticized the colonialism of the Romano-Germanic nations. He argued that Europe used evolutionary sciences as a means of deceiving people and legitimizing, in the eyes of the Romano-Germans and their followers, imperialist colonial policies and vandalistic exploitation by the "great powers" of Europe and America. He explained the bitter legacy of colonization as follows:

"When Europeans encounter a non-Romano-Germanic nation, they bring their goods and guns. If the nation offers no resistance, the Europeans will conquer them, make them their colony, and Europeanize them by force. If the nation intends to resist, then in order to be able to fight the Europeans, they have to acquire cannons and all the improvements of European technology. But this requires, on the one hand, factories, and industrial plants, and on the other hand, the study of European applied sciences. But factories are inconceivable without the European socio-political way of life, and the applied sciences cannot exist without the 'pure' sciences. Thus, in order to fight against

Europe, the nations in question have to adopt, step by step, all of modern Romano-Germanic civilization to Europeanize themselves voluntarily. So, in both cases, Europeanization seems inevitable."

Nikolai Trubetzkoi and his fellow thinkers who advocate similar views argue that European concepts of progress and civilization are nothing more than a cover for cynical and self-serving colonial and aggressive designs perpetuated by ideological tools woven into European science in history, ethnography, philosophy, and similar fields. Also, while emphasizing that Romano-Germanic cultural superiority is based on an egocentric mentality, they diagnose that this egocentrism is illogical and harmful. They state that destructive Europeanization can be prevented if Europeanized nations reject Romano-Germanic egocentrism and retain a healthy sense of national pride.

> Thus, it appears possible to define the Russian intellectuals' criticism of Eurocentrism and their Eurasianist ideas to create a synthesis between Europe and Asia as an intellectual rebellion against Eurocentrism.

How monolithic is the construct?

However, it would not be an accurate assessment to characterize Eurasianism as a monolithic construct, whether in the classical sense of the 1920s or the form of neo-Eurasianism of the 1990s specific to Russia. According to researcher Paolo Pizzolo, "neo-Eurasianism can be situated in the context of the disappearance of the Soviet Union, which many believe occurred for two main reasons: treason of its inner elites and machinations of the international forces of Atlanticism." As per Marlène Laruelle, a French historian, sociologist and political scientist specializing in Eurasia, neo-Eurasianism "maintains that Europe is not an advanced state of development but represents a specific mode of development that cannot be represented by Russia, which must 'unlearn the West' and reject the imperialism of European identity."

Eurasianism, as a very dynamic idea, constantly develops and renews itself and there is not and cannot be a single standardized concept of Eurasianism. In my judgment, identifying the contemporary Eurasianist way of thinking entirely with the neo-Eurasianism specific to post-Soviet Russia means putting Eurasianism into a too narrow mold. Such a way of thinking damages the international character and the intellectual richness of the Eurasianist approach.

> In Eurasianism, which is not unique to Russia, it is necessary to give the West the value it deserves without forgetting what happened in the past and not to place Eurasianism within a rigid ideological and political framework.

In this context, valuing the concepts of Eurasia and Eurasianism, engaging in a thought exercise on these concepts should not be seen as turning one's back on the West despite its history of bigoted Eurocentrism and colonialism and ignoring the tremendous contributions of the West to the world cultural, scientific and technological heritage. Not giving due value to these contributions is tantamount to committing a great injustice. Contemporary Eurasianism in the context of Türkiye is, arguably, giving the West the value it deserves without forgetting what happened in the past, rediscovering the East, and, within this understanding, leaving aside clichés and thinking about new syntheses. We define this approach as "Constructive Eurasianism".

Dr. Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun
Analyst, Centre for Eurasian Studies, AVIM (Türkiye)