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RUSSIAN GEOPOLITICAL DOCTRINE OF “VELIKIY LIMITROF”

Abstract:

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in Russian intellectual societies became fashionable to appeal to the geographic space and its influence on current policy. The resurgence of geopolitics as a field of knowledge and forms of reflection on international affairs resulted in a sharp increase in publications on the subject of Russian researchers, politicians and journalists. Among them, a special place occupied Vadim Tsymburskiy (1957-2009), academic scholar, philosopher and geopolitician. He created an original geopolitical thought, including Island Russia concept and the Grand Limitrof (in Russian: Velyky Limitrof) that entered the canon of modern Russian geopolitics. Tsymburskiy came out from the assumption that Russia is a separate civilization, “island” separated from the world by the Grand Limitrof – frontiers stretching from the Gulf of Finland by Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Mongolia to the Pacific’s shores. An article focuses on the importance and the impact of Tsymburskiy’s

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thought on contemporary Russian policy, including relations with the so-called near abroad.

Key words: Vadim Tsymburskiy, Velikiy Limitrof, geopolitics, Russia, geopolitical thought.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, research and geopolitical reflection in Russia was revived. This was largely due to the desire to redefine the place of the Russian Federation in the changed geopolitical system. The collapse of communism also meant a departure from the history of treating geopolitics as "bourgeois science". It should be noted, however, that geopolitical thinking, which closely links the analysis of the influence of space on politics, has a long tradition in Russia, going well beyond the 20th century. The connection between spatial thinking and reflection on state policy can already be found in Mikhail Lomonosov, Nikolai Berdyaev and Fyodor Dostoyevsky (Potulski 2010).

Russian geopolitics nowadays refers broadly to the tradition of classical geopolitics, which was born at the end of the 19th century. Especially popular are the concepts of German geopolitics, headed by Karl Haushofer. Traditional Russian geopolitical codes, i.e. the spatial imagery of Russia's place on the international arena, have revived. Thus, references to the concepts of Moscow-The Third Rome, Russia-Byzantium or pan-Slavic ideas are popular. The author puts forward a

research thesis according to which the concept of "Russia-island" presented and promoted in the 1990s by Vadim Tsymburskiy is a separate current of deliberations within contemporary Russian geopolitical thought. This current will be called isolationism. It is one of the three main approaches to the place of Russia in the modern world (alongside atlanticism and eurasianism). We can even call these images separate schools of geopolitical thought.

Atlanticism promotes Russia's relationship with the civilisational West (mainly the European Union and the USA). In political deliberations in contemporary Russia, this current refers to the tradition of liberalism of the tsarist times. It promotes above all the Western model of modernisation. Eurasianism, on the other hand, sees Russia as a separate civilization, with an expansive and anti-criminalist approach. The Eurasian school goes back to the roots of the first half of the 20th century and the work of such thinkers as Nikolai Danilevsky (1822-1885), Piotr Savitski (1895-1968), Nikolai Trubietskoy (1890-1938), and Lev Gumilov (1912-1992). Its representatives propagate the view that there is a separate Russian civilisation with its geographical roots in the Central Asian steppes, being independent of Western and Asian civilisations (Ashenkampf 2006).

Isolationism assumes the limitation of relations with neighbouring countries, and even partial autarky, aimed at defending the political, economic and civilizational interests of its country. Due

to Russia's natural resources and the vastness of its territory, this trend has a very long tradition in this country. Until the reign of Peter I, Russia was a country largely isolated from the rest of Europe (Potulski 2010).

Vadim Tsymburskiy was born on 17 February 1957 in Lviv. He was a classical philologist by education. After graduating from the Faculty of Philology of Lomonosov Moscow State University in 1981, he worked for the next four years as an assistant in the Department of Classical Philology of the MGU, and then, after defending his doctorate in philology, he moved to the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, where he was employed at the Institute of the United States and Canada. After the fall of the USSR, he worked at the Institute of Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and then, until his death, at the Institute of Philosophy of the RAN. In his research work, apart from philological issues (mainly Homer's work), he was primarily concerned with philosophy and geopolitical thought. He particularly liked the research area called with literature the science of civilization and geoculture, i.e. the study of distinctness of cultural spaces. He died on 23 March 2009 in Moscow.

According to the Russian philosopher, Russia constitutes a separate civilisation which, as a separate geopolitical subject, can be defined in three ways. Firstly, the country constitutes a "geopolitical ethnic niche" which is located to the east of the "Roman-Germanic platform of the North Civilisation". The Russian "ethnic niche" is,

therefore, a separate platform filling the space between Russia and China. It should be noted here that the "ethnic niche" is not to be equated with ethnic nationalism. What we are dealing with here is rather a reference to Leo Gumilov's concept of ethnoses. The creator of the concept of Russia-Isle by means of the Russian ethnic niche understood the peoples who had lived for centuries in the Volga region, the Urals and Siberia, and this factor which gave them the form of a separate "platform of the North-Westernisation" was the Russian state (Russian centre of power) (Tsymburskiyy 1993).

The second factor defining Russia's distinctiveness as a geopolitical centre of power is the extent of its territories to the east of the Urals. The Russian philosopher pointed out that for more than four hundred years of history, Russia has not experienced any serious threats from China or Mongolia that would threaten its rule over Siberia. Hence the "danger" of the Asian threat to Russia, raised by e.g. Vladimir Solovov, he considered it unrealistic and treated it as a very distant history (the invasion and reign of Mongols in the Middle Ages). He differed here fundamentally from the theorists of the Eurasian school, who raised the Mongol occupation period in Russian history to the rank of one of the main paradigms affecting Russian identity and a factor determining the geopolitical awareness of the Russian elite (Massaka 2001).

The third factor determining Russia's geopolitical distinctiveness was, according to Tsymburskiy, its separation from

Romantic-German Europe, which he treated as the cradle of "liberal civilisation". What is very important, the Russian geopolitician separated the separate space between the Western European civilisation (which in his opinion was "the first centre of modernisation") and the "Russian platform". He originally called this area 'stream territories' (in the original *territorii proliivy*; Tsymburskiy also uses the English term 'stream territories'). This concept will later be the basis for the delineation of the "Great Limitrophe" area. The Russian geopolitician clearly rejected the thesis of civilisational unity between Central Europe and Western Europe. He believed that religious factors (the influence of Catholicism and Protestantism) in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary or the Baltic states were not decisive. He claimed that the social and economic processes that led to the separation of Central Europe, which was different from both the western and eastern parts of the continent, were crucial. The central part of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which according to Tsymburskiy was decisive for the creation of the streaming territories, did not belong to the "Western world-economy" nor did it adopt the eastern model of statehood led by a strong centralization of power. The Russian geopolitical theorist stressed that since the beginning of modern times the "European system" and the "Baltic-Black Sea system" have developed separately (Tsymburskiy 1993).

Vadim Tsymburskiy presented his geopolitical concept for the first time most fully in an article entitled *Russia-Island: Prospects of Russian Geopolitics*, published in 1993 in the journal *Polis*. He contrasted his views on Russia's place in the modern world with the concepts of both pro-Western and expansionist policies. He believed that both did not correspond to the real geopolitical conditions and political possibilities of Russia. He also opposed the ideology of Russian geopolitical thought. He was in favour of a cool calculation of power relations in the international environment.

Vadim Tsymburskiy, based on the assumption of Russia's civilizational distinctiveness, did not follow in the footsteps of the eurasianists who identified Russia with Eurasia but created the concept of Russia's "insularity" (ros. *ostrovityanstvo*). This feature (insularity) was, in his opinion, to be determined, among other things, by the kind of armed conflicts that this country has had in its history. The Russian philosopher pointed out that most of the wars were conducted by Russia on the periphery of its empire. It was extremely rare for an opponent to directly threaten the centre of the country. However, if this was the case, the aggression was spread along the entire length of the "territorial straits" located on the country's borders. According to Tsymburskiy, these border territories were of decisive importance for the development of the Russian empire and caused the "isolation" of the centre of the empire and the channelling of armed conflicts. What is important, he stressed the different paths

of civilisational development of Western Europe and Russia, hence he considered any ideas promoting the idea of "Russia's return to Europe" to be unfounded

The Russian isolationist has consistently criticised eurasianism as a school of geopolitical thinking. He was critical of this intellectual tradition. He probably summarised his position most concisely in a fragment of the title of one of his articles: From Russia-Eurasia to Russia in Eurasia (Tsymburskiy 1995). This clearly shows that Tsymburskiy's goal was not only to present an alternative path of Russia's development but also to introduce a separate geopolitical code into the intellectual debate, i.e. an image, a spatial representation of Russia's place and role in global politics. He rejected both Russia's belonging to the European civilisation, which, as indicated above, he identified with the cradle of the "liberal civilisation", as well as a policy of great power, focused on expansion. According to the Russian geopolitical theorist, eurasianism as an ideology is based on an erroneous assumption about the possibility of Russia dominating all of Eurasia, derived from Halford Mackinder's concept of Heartland, which assumed that the one who controls the central part of Eurasia (the heart of the land - Heartland) dominates the whole continent (Tsymburskiy 1995).

The development of the Eurasian idea was strongly determined by the promotion of opposition between the maritime and land powers. Among the most prominent precursors of this current of

geopolitical thought in Russia were Piotr Savickiy (1895-1968), Nikolaj Danielevskiy (1822-1885), Nikolay Trubietskoy (1890-1983), Vladimir Laman'skiy (1833-1914) and Georgiy Florovskiy (1893-1979). A strong influence of geography on the development of countries and civilizations was noticed by Lev Mietschnikov (1838-1888), a geographer and the author of a book titled "The Development of the State and Civilization". He was a geographer, author of the book entitled "Civilization and Great Historical Rivers". In it, he divided the history of humanity into the following periods: the river (antiquity and the Middle Ages), sea (since the fall of Carthage) and ocean (since the discovery of America). Vadim Tsymburskiy departed from the opposition between the powers dictated by geographical factors in favour of the concept of cultural distinctiveness (Sykulski 2009).

The creator of the concept of Russia-Isle has based his theory on geocultural foundations, i.e., those relating to the definition of the distinctiveness of the Russian cultural space. He tried to prove that the image of Russia as an island is one of the oldest cultural archetypes in the Russian tradition. He even coined the term "Eurasian Atlantis" to emphasise the autonomy of Russian geopolitical and geocultural subjectivity. The sources of this archetype are found in medieval images of Kievan Rus', an area surrounded by a dense network of lakes and swamps, forming a kind of "continental island". (Tsymburskiy 1997).

In his geopolitical concept, Vadim Tsymburskiy formulated the important term "Great Limitrof", which he referred to a large border area that includes Central and Eastern Europe, Transnistria, Transcaucasus, Central Asia, and then a belt inhabited by Altai and Turkish-Mongolian peoples up to the Russian-Chinese border. As part of this area, it also mentions Xinjiang and independent Mongolia, Inner Mongolia (part of China) and several Russian autonomous regions such as Buryatia and Tuva. This border strip, stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific, was, in his opinion, supposed to naturally condition not only the distinctiveness of Russia's civilisation but also affect its "insularity" and make it necessary to pursue an "inward" policy. It was to be directed towards the development of the centre and the Far East, especially the modernisation of Siberia (Tsymburskiy 2009).

It is worth noting that the very concept of limitroph has a much longer history. It is derived from Latin (Latin *limitrophus* - borderland) and means border area. In the tradition of Russian geopolitics, it has been used since the 1920s. Soviet science rejected geopolitics as a separate science or research method ("bourgeois science"), which does not mean that researchers in Soviet Russia and later in the USSR did not draw on classical geopolitics. It should be remembered that spatial thinking about politics is inseparable from Russian political tradition. In the Soviet encyclopaedia of 1929, we find the term

limitroph in reference to the Baltic States, Poland and Finland (Volin 1929).

In Vadim Tsymburskiy's concept, the area of the "Great Limitroph" in a way determines the historical distinctiveness of Russia. The Russian researcher pointed out that the western part of this area may become a convenient instrument to try to isolate Russia from the western centres of power, hence he postulated maintaining Russian influence on the Kaliningrad-Crimea axis. In his opinion, the demand to concentrate political and economic and social energy on the development of the centre of the state and the strengthening of the Far East (the development of the 'Russia-Isle') should not mean the withdrawal of Russian influence from the territories of the straits. He also did not rule out an attempt to extend Moscow's direct power in these areas in the future.

In Russian geopolitical thought, Vadim Tsymburskiy's concept has its own separate place. After 1991, it became neither a dominant paradigm in Russian foreign policy nor an idea that set the tone for other currents of geopolitical reflection. It is worth noting, however, that it is continuously present in academic textbooks on geopolitics in Russia. Some of the themes of this concept ("The Great Limitroph") are always present in the Russian tradition of spatial thinking. It is worth considering why Vadim Tsymburskiy's thought has not found a wider group of adherents. The author assumes here that the Russian geopolitical tradition is directed towards the power of global politics;

hence the narrowing of Russian politics to the so-called internal geopolitics could not have met with a broader resonance in political and intellectual circles.

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