

Geopolitical Visions, Globalisation, and the Remaking of Russia's Eurasian Borders

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Geopolitical Visions, Globalisation, and the Remaking of Russia's Eurasian Borders

Abstract

This paper traces how the reconfiguration of Russia's inter-state borders in Eurasia are being rationalised through two distinct vectors: one which privileges modernisation, cross-border flows, and is framed in terms of integration with the global economy; and an alternative vision, which is related to geopolitical imperatives and a response to shifts in Russia's relationship with the West. The paper follows these two distinct narratives on integration in the rhetoric and speeches of the political leadership, as well as in the policy initiatives of the government. At times complementary, these competing world-views have furthered cross-border flows and investment, yet at the same time they have also thrown up new contradictions and tensions. Recognising the dialectic process behind regional integration initiatives can offer us new analytical insights and possibilities for understanding the unpredictable and uncertain reshaping of Russia's borders.

Introduction

Over the last quarter of a century, the nature of Russia's inter-state borders has played a critical role in shaping the parameters and values of a new state, in a new world. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, increasing interdependencies and cross-border flows with Europe (in particular with the European Union as a political and economic unit) have had to be negotiated alongside a desire for Russia to remain a Great Power, with an associated strengthening of state-sovereignty (see Eskelinen et al. 2013). These latter perspectives are often interpreted as being opposed to interdependency and cross-border interactions, manifesting in the form of increased protectionism (Pursianen 2007 cited in *ibid*, 2) and more robust strategies of securitising borders and territory.

However, this paper suggests that certain geopolitical narratives and statist discourses in contemporary Russia have also been complementary to neo-liberal economic orthodoxy in dematerialising inter-state borders and legitimating integration projects. It is argued that in contrast to Russia's relationship with Europe, these two meta-narratives have been instrumental in reshaping the nature of borders in both post-Soviet space and in Russia's engagement with the Asia-Pacific region (APR). In both these regions we find the Russian leadership active in rationalising an integrationist agenda through neo-liberal rhetoric and policies that emphasise the harmonisation of trade-tariffs, the reduction of barriers for investment, the privileging of market forces, and freedom of movement for goods and people. At the

same time, this paper also traces how cross-border flows and investment opportunities have been accelerated and enhanced by geopolitical expediency rather than the rules and logic of the market.

Much of this paper follows the ways in which the Russian leadership has selectively balanced the demands of neo-liberal economics with perceived geopolitical imperatives, and the ways in which this tension has played out on Russia's Eurasian borders. It is suggested that the current Russian leadership has employed in its integration agenda in East Asia and in post-Soviet space a dialectic strategy, which tries to resolve tensions between neo-liberal economics and Great Power geopolitics. It is driven by an attempt to secure Russia's status in the world, and is one in which Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, emerges not as an ideologue, but as an enduring pragmatist, drawing on disparate streams of thought in order to realise a unifying vision of a strong state; a viable economy; social solidarity; a patriotic society; and the retention of Russian influence in the near abroad and beyond (see Duncan 2015, 107-8).

The focus of this paper is not on the way in which these integration projects function, nor on how they draw on previous incarnations of regional cooperation. Instead, drawing on the author's previous work on a dialectic strategy in the Russian leadership's policy making (see Richardson 2015), it traces how integration projects towards the Asia-Pacific region, and the articulation of the Eurasian Union project, are opening and closing interstate borders, and the inherent contradictions behind these processes. As Shannon Brincat has noted, such an approach – with its “ontological focus” on contradiction - does not assume a mechanistic dialectical “triad” of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, which somehow arrives at a final stage automatically overcoming contradiction (2011, 681-2). Rather, the emphasis of such a socio-relational dialectic approach is on understanding the process of sublation (rather than synthesis) where outcomes are uncertain and multiple, involving a complex nexus of agency and structure, power and intersubjectivity (ibid, 688). This paper attempts to chart the existence and interplay of two integrationist narratives, and sketches how their contradictions and complementarities are played out on Russia's borders.

Asia-Pacific Integration

One of the prevailing agendas in the development of post-Soviet Russia has been a desire for the Russian economy to be modernised, at the same time as it becomes broadly and deeply integrated into global markets, financial networks, and investment flows. It is a vision where Russia's borders are open to trade, labour, and capital, as well as to ideas, technological transfers, and exchange. It is traditionally fixated on the potential of Russia's relationship with Europe (see Eskelinen et al.

2013), although it is a vision that is not exclusively pro-Western or socially liberal. Indeed, in recent years, a coalition of commentators, business leaders, and political elites has increasingly articulated a neo-liberal vision of Russia's integration with the Asia-Pacific region as a means to help realise the state's possibilities for both modernisation and for enhancing its status as a Eurasian power.

Indicative are the views of Sergei Karaganov – a former advisor to President Yeltsin and the current Honorary Chairman of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy. Karaganov has enthusiastically noted that: “it is the growth potential of the Asia-Pacific region that will determine the country's future” (Karaganov 2011). While Dmitri Trenin – Director of the Moscow Carnegie Centre – has undergone his own conversion towards Russia's Asian future. A long-time advocate of Europe, and in particular Germany, driving Russia's economic development, he has more recently endorsed “dynamic Asia” as a critical node for Russia's modernisation (Trenin 2013). In his terms, Russia is a “Euro-Pacific” state, one possessed with a mutual urge to integrate with both the European Union, and the states of the Asia-Pacific (ibid). In his Euro-Pacific vision, Trenin has placed an increasing emphasis on developing an Asian vector, alongside a European one, stating that: “Russia's cutting-edge, twenty-first century frontier lies to the east, where it has both a need and a chance to catch up with its immediate Pacific neighbors” (Trenin 2011, 241).

Perhaps the most significant moment in this strategic turn to the East took place in September 2012 when Vladivostok hosted the APEC Summit. In the run-up to this conference the cities redevelopment became a symbol of the material and discursive reorientation of Russia towards the APR (see Richardson 2013). Vladivostok was to be reconfigured from a city of neglect, criminality, and obscurity into a modernised portal to Asia. President Putin categorically stated the importance he placed on this eastwards vector for Russia, declaring that: “We view this dynamic region as the most important factor for the successful future of the whole country” (Putin 2012a). Just a few months after the conference, and during his state-of-the-nation speech in December 2012, Putin returned to this theme asserting that: “Siberia and the Far East represent our enormous potential [...] And now we must realise our potential. We have the opportunity to assume a worthy place in the Asia-Pacific region, the most dynamic region in the world” (Putin 2012b).

At the summit, the official goals of the Russian hosts emphasised trade liberalisation amongst APEC economies; reduced tariffs on a wide range of goods; strategies to ensure food security across the APR; intra-regional transport and innovation cooperation; and initiatives for creating a common educational and scientific space (Bordachev and Kanayev 2014).¹ The infrastructural upgrades associated with APEC

¹ Timofey Bordachev is Head of the Eurasian Programme of the Foundation for Development and Support of the Valdai Discussion Club, and Director of the Center for Comprehensive European and

2012 were targeted at connecting this region with its neighbours and involved huge state-led investment in the Russian Far East, including a new international airport and rail link for Vladivostok; the upgrading of its port; and the development of the Kozmino oil terminal to become one of Russia's most important export hubs (Vorontsova 2012).

As a sign of the continued interest in the region, a new Minister for the Development of the Russian Far East (Alexander Galushka), and a new Presidential Envoy to the Far Eastern Federal District (Yuri Trutnev) were appointed in late summer 2013. They replaced Viktor Ishaev, who had previously occupied both positions, and their appointments seemed designed to energise the ambitious development plans for the region. This change in personnel was also followed by the announcement of an updated model for developing Russia's eastern territories – introduced in October 2013 – which focussed on the need to establish priority development areas, with favourable investment, tax and administrative regimes (Bordachev and Kanayev 2014).

Following these initiatives, Vladivostok was designated a “free port” in October 2015 with the establishment of administrative benefits and tax breaks in 15 regions of Primorski Krai,² which according to Galushka would attract goods, capital, and people to Russia (Anon 2016a). It was also announced that a visa-free regime for tourists would be established when entering Vladivostok, while the inaugural *Eastern Economic Forum* took place on the former APEC site in September 2015 (Lukin 2015, 5).³ In his speech at the Forum, Putin declared that: “Procedures for crossing the border will be substantially simplified [...] there will be one single agency [...] and it will be possible to make an advance electronic declaration of goods” (Putin 2015). Since January 1, 2014, South Koreans have been allowed visa-free travel for tourist stays of up to 60 days (Anon 2014a), which followed similar agreements with Hong Kong (signed in 2009), Macao (2009), and Thailand (2005).⁴ Organised groups of Chinese tourists are also allowed visa-free travel to Russia, and since June 1, 2013, Russia began full participation in the APEC Business Travel Card scheme. This programme allows reciprocal visa-free access for designated business activities to all APEC members (except the USA and Canada, which are transitional members of the scheme) (Anon 2013b).

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² Vladivostok is the administrative capital of Primorski Region.

³ However, as of writing, the process for easing visa-requirements for stays in Vladivostok of 8 days or less has twice been delayed, with reports in July 2016 stating that its launch had been postponed for another six months (Anon 2016a; 2016b).

⁴ See:

http://www.kdmid.ru/info.aspx?lst=info_wiki&it=/Spisok_stran_s_uproshchennym_poryadkom_vyezda.aspx

With Russia's Far East declared open for business and travel, in the wake of APEC 2012 there were initially some positive regional indicators. In 2013 there was an immediate surge in Primorski's foreign trade, which increased by 41.5 per cent (DVTU 2014). In the same year, Foreign Direct Investment in the Primorski economy increased 4.1 times compared to 2012, amounting to \$1.7 billion, with Japan the largest investor at \$1.1 billion, China at \$31 million, and South Korea at \$24 million (Tret'yak 2014). However, these trends were short-lived and in 2014, there was a decline in Primorski's foreign trade by 2.5 per cent from the previous year, with the foreign trade of the entire Far Eastern Region declining by 2.6 per cent (DVTU 2015). This was still better than Russia as whole, which saw trade shrink by 7 per cent over the same period (FTS 2015).

The decline in trade during 2014 coincided with Western sanctions on Russia, which commenced in March of that year after Russia's annexation of Crimea.⁵ It was against these dramatically worsening relations with the West that on May 21, 2014, a huge deal to supply China with Russian gas was announced at a reported \$400 billion over 30 years (Kashin 2014, 6). This became Russia's biggest ever energy deal, with contracts and memoranda of intent on Chinese investment also being signed in areas such as coal, copper ore, liquefied natural gas, production of construction materials, petrochemicals, and machine building (ibid). In October 2014, Putin then hosted Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang, in Moscow, with the Russian President referring to China and Russia as "natural partners and natural allies,"⁶ and various deals were signed including a currency swap of 150 billion Yuan (\$25 billion), a double tax-treaty, a satellite-navigation accord, cooperation on high-speed rail, and a further agreement linked to the earlier gas supply deal (Fang 2014).

After a long-held desire amongst the Russian leadership to try and avoid excessive dependency on China (see Kuhrt 2014, 6-7), and the influence of powerful Russian interests lobbying for protection from competition (Gabuev 2016a), these deals represented a radical change in policy. In 2014, the Russian government also agreed to sell Chinese companies stakes in the country's most lucrative oil field, and the world's biggest copper field, both in Eastern Siberia (Lukin 2015, 3). While at the Krasnoyarsk Economic Forum, held in late February 2015, Russian Deputy Prime Minister, Arkady Dvorkovich, stated that with regard to selling China controlling stakes in key oil and gas projects in Russia: "If there is a request [from China], we will seriously consider it. And I see no political obstacles at the moment" (Petrovsky 2015). He also invited Chinese companies to be involved with creating transport infrastructure in Siberia and the Far East (Sevastyanov 2016, 10), while work is

⁵ These sanctions included limited sanctions from Japan but not South Korea, China, or other Asian states.

⁶ This was the first time Putin had used the word "ally" with respect to Beijing (Lukin, 2015, 2).

already underway on a railway bridge in the Russian Far East, linking Russia and China across the Amur River (Lukin 2015, 3).

In 2015, loans from China to Russia totaled \$18 billion, making China the largest source of external financing (Gabuev 2016c), and in April 2016, it was announced that the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China would provide loans of \$12 billion over fifteen years for the Yamal LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) project. This followed a deal in March 2016 to sell a 9.9 percent stake in Yamal LNG to China's Silk Road Fund for almost \$1.1 billion (Gabuev 2016a). Also in April 2016 it was announced that China would provide a 400 billion-ruble (\$6.2 billion) loan for Russia's Moscow–Kazan High-Speed Rail Project (Anon 2016c). The overall cost of the project is expected to exceed \$15 billion and could become part of a \$100 billion high-speed railway between Moscow and Beijing, with China already developing high-speed trains to run on both Russian and Chinese gauges (Anon 2016d). It appeared that in the two years since the annexation of Crimea and the onset of Western sanctions, a de facto ban on Chinese participation in large infrastructure and natural-resource projects had been decisively lifted (Gabuev 2016a).

However, this flurry of cross-border projects, deals, and loans is also being tempered by a number of challenges. Questions are being raised over slowing demand in China and oversupply of energy, with Turkmenistan alone set to increase the volume of gas deliveries to China to 65 billion cubic meters by 2020 (Orlov and Falyakhov 2014). Valery Nesterov, of Sberbank CIB, has noted that China is reviewing its energy needs due to the economic slowdown, while access to LNG imports – such as from Australia – are becoming more available (Anon 2015a). This has made the proposal for a supply of gas to China from Russia over a “western route,” via the Altai region, much less likely (ibid). A negotiator on the Russian side of the May 2014 gas deal also revealed that in the haste to sign an agreement they were “squeezed like a lemon” by their Chinese counterparts (Petrovsky 2014), with a widely held consensus that Russia is receiving a price less than if the gas was sold to Western Europe (Putz 2016).

Also, in terms of foreign direct investment from China, Russia only attracted \$560 million in 2015, compared to \$4 billion in 2013 (Gabuev 2016c). Access to Chinese loans is also largely from political banks closely connected to the Chinese government and only available to a handful of strategic state-owned companies and individuals close to the Russian President (Gabuev 2016a). Private Chinese enterprises have been significantly less active (Lukin 2015, 5) and Russian financiers, including the first deputy chairman of the state-controlled Russian bank VTB, Yuri Soloviev, have complained that in the wake of Western sanctions, most Chinese banks have been reluctant to execute inter-bank transactions (Anon 2015g). These banks have adhered more strictly to sanctions than Moscow anticipated (Gabuev

2015a) and Victor Vekselberg, one of Russia's most influential and wealthiest businessmen, stated in March 2016 that:

There was a certain level of optimism regarding Chinese companies. It was thought they were coming to the Russian market to spend big money. But the Chinese turned out to be very rational and very good businesspeople, so they wouldn't give money away for nothing (cited in Gabuev 2016b)

According to Alexander Gabuev, Senior Associate at the Carnegie Center in Moscow, Vekselberg's words captured the mood of the Russian elite, with 2015 a year of "sobering reality" as the value of Russia's trade with China collapsed by 28.6 percent to just \$68 billion, at the same time as trade with South Korea dropped by 38 percent and Japan by 40 percent (ibid). In 2016, it appears that these negative trends have endured despite a neo-liberalisation of the border regime with Russia's Asian neighbours and the removal of certain barriers to the movement of people, goods, and capital. These trends have also been in spite of great efforts on the part of the leadership to privilege relations with China, which included the signing of energy mega-deals, cross-border infrastructure projects, and the granting of unprecedented investment opportunities. While Russian businesses and politicians perhaps anticipated more from this opening to China, it is a process that has seen cross-border trade and investment in the region become dramatically reconfigured by geopolitical expediency as much as by the logic of the market. As the following section charts, it is a scenario that also shares remarkable parallels and similarities with Russia's (re)integration agenda in post-Soviet space.

Eurasian Integration

Ever since the then Prime Minister of Russia, Vladimir Putin, declared in September 2011 that he intended to return as President, there has been a concurrent commitment to a different kind of integration project in Russia's "near abroad." Here the role of neo-liberal economics in reshaping inter-state borders is being negotiated alongside geopolitical imperatives focussed on Russia's supposed economic and cultural compatibilities with certain successor states of the USSR (see Richardson 2015). In this sense, the Eurasian Union can be seen as a resource for achieving economic growth and accelerating trade flows, at the same time as it is framed with an appeal to certain strands of Russian nationalism associated with Eurasianism and the idea of Eurasia as a unified economic, political, and "civilisational" space (see Tsygankov, 2013).

In October 2011, during his campaign for a return to the Presidency, Putin first announced to Russia and the world his ambition for creating by 2015 a Eurasian

Union.⁷ It represented one of the only new and distinctive ideas in his re-election programme, and would expand on the pre-existing Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) formed in 2010 (a free-trade customs bloc between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus). The proposal for a Eurasian Union envisioned taking integration a significant stage further. It was a project designed to reconfigure and open the borders of its member states in order to achieve what Putin termed “a new epoch of relations in post-Soviet space” (Putin 2011b). It included the potential for expansion beyond its three original member states and in January 2015, Armenia joined what was now the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), with Kyrgyzstan following in August 2015 (Jarosiewicz, 2015).

At the time of its announcement, Putin enthusiastically emphasised its neo-liberal features and mimicry of European Union (EU) institutions, declaring that “we are adapting the experience of the Schengen Agreement that benefits Europeans as well as everyone who comes to work, study, or holiday in the EU” (Putin 2011b). As Putin also stressed, the Union would function as “a rule-based body, consistent with the World Trade Organization (WTO) regime and modern international norms” (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2012). In 2014, Andrei Slepnev, Minister for Trade of the Eurasian Economic Commission, reiterated that with the work of the Commission: “We are talking about the need to ensure the ‘four freedoms’ – freedom of trade in goods, trade in services, movement of capital and movement of labor – in order to create an attractive economic space” (Slepnev 2014).

Achievements towards these goals were unexpectedly rapid and have included a common customs tariff; an ECU Customs Code; the establishment of a Eurasian Economic Commission (with broad powers to represent its member states in trade negotiations and to set standards in a wide range of economic matters) (Oksanian 2013); as well as the highly symbolic removal of customs controls across common borders (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2012). In heralding the project, Putin emphatically declared that: “we will no longer have to equip the 7,000 kilometre-long Russian-Kazakh border” (Putin 2011a). Its founding members have since concluded several agreements aimed at making labour laws more uniform, and establishing a common policy on employment, medical care, social insurance for migrants, as well as mutual recognition of education degrees and common regulations on paying income taxes (Boguslavska 2015, 9; Chufrin 2015, 3). There has been progress towards creating a common labour market, while the goal of a common market for electricity, and oil and natural gas have been set as more ambitious, longer-term aims (anticipated for 2019 and 2025 respectively) (Boguslavska 2015, 9).

⁷ This was achieved on January 1, 2015. However, perhaps in an effort to emphasise its economic rationale, it became known as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

There have also been steps towards the establishment of a common market of services for roads, rail, water and air transport (Anon 2015d), and a continued commitment to facilitating the movement of people and goods across borders. On April 7, 2016, Russian Prime Minister, Dmirtri Medvedev, and Armenian Prime Minister, Hovik Abrahamyan, discussed in Yerevan efforts to enhance the smooth running of the border crossing point at Verkhni Lars (on the Russian-Georgian border), as well as the possibility of using internal Russian passports to travel to Armenia, which Medvedev stated “testifies to the special nature of the relations between our peoples” (Anon 2016e). In March 2016, representatives of the Eurasian Economic Commission, and the Migration Services, Ministries of Internal Affairs, and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus also met at Cholpon-Ata in Kyrgyzstan to discuss simplifying the procedure of border controls for citizens of the EEU, with special attention on implementing the “road-map” towards Kyrgyzstan’s membership of the Common Economic Space (Anon 2016f).

Yet, at the same time as reconfigurations of inter-state borders according to the rhetoric of trade liberalisation; freedom of movement; and the harmonisation of tariffs, there has also been a parallel narrative. Andrei Tsygankov has pointed out that ever since Putin’s presidential election campaign commenced in autumn 2011, there has been an increasing use of a “civilisational language” to describe Russia’s distinctiveness and its place in the world (2013, 5). In major speeches, Putin has consistently promoted a vision of Russia uniting peoples both within and without the borders of the Russian Federation. Indicative of such an approach was Putin’s state-of-the-nation speech, in 2012, in which he made clear that his government would “propose projects that will unite nations and regions” (Putin 2012c). At the 2013 Valdai Meeting, Putin described the Eurasian Union as “a project for maintaining the identity of nations in the historical Eurasian space in a new century and in a new world,” adding that: “Eurasian integration is a chance for the entire post-Soviet space to become an independent centre for global development, rather than remaining on the outskirts of Europe and Asia” (Putin 2013). It is a rhetoric that privileges the critical role that Russia occupies in organising this meta-space.

In this framing of the project there are echoes of elements associated with the neo-Eurasianism espoused by the likes of Aleksandr Dugin – the controversial, charismatic, and idiosyncratic leader of the International Eurasian Movement, and until 2014 Head of Conservative Studies and Professor in the Department of Sociology at Moscow State University (Antyushenina 2014). Dugin is “without doubt post-Soviet Russia’s most prolific and well-known geopolitician” (Bassin and Aksenov 2006, 105), whose prolific writings promote a world view which categorically rejects certain aspects of modernity (Ingram 2001), globalisation, and the notion of a borderless world. Instead Dugin strives towards realising the idea of a contiguous Eurasian space in which “the cultural unity and historical destiny of

the Russians and the non-Russian peoples” are fused together in “a rhetorical cult of national diversity,” which is at the same time combined with virulent anti-Westernism (Laruelle 2012, 203-204).

Initially, Dugin was sceptical of Putin’s Eurasian Union project, and its foundation on neo-liberal norms. He expressed frustration at the leadership’s vacillation between “liberal ways” and “patriotic ones,” and specifically criticised the project as a return to “vague liberal nonsense” stating that: “It’s a disappointing lack of a clear strategy, specific projects, bright ideas” (Zuev 2011). For Dugin, the unification of a cohesive Eurasian space under Russian leadership cannot be realised through adherence to neo-liberal rules and values associated with the West. For Dugin it is a struggle of ideas with the West that will be played out on the edges of Eurasia, where “the battle for the integration of the post-Soviet space is a battle for Kiev” (Dugin cited in Laruelle 2012, 117).

However, as one well-known commentator acknowledged in an interview with the author “nobody wants to have a partner who all the time pretends to be a leader” (Anon 2014b). While another respected Moscow-based analyst noted that the main reason behind the Eurasian project was the “geopolitics of Russia. Russia would like to restore this sphere of exclusive influence” and the Eurasian Union project, as it was originally conceived, was to bring Ukraine back into the Russian sphere of influence (Anon 2014c). However, it was to be the rejection of an Association Agreement with the European Union by Ukrainian President, Viktor Yanukovich, in November 2013 that saw the beginning of protests against his pro-Russian government. As the protest movement grew, Yanukovich fled to Russia in February 2014, and the newly installed Ukrainian government completed the signing of the political provisions of an Association Agreement with the EU on March 21, 2014.

Russia’s annexation of Crimea, and its support for separatists in eastern Ukraine, all but ended any hopes of the Russian leadership that Ukraine would join the EEU in the foreseeable future, while the redrawing of inter-state borders on ethno-nationalist terms also had a profound impact on other members of the Eurasian Union. In a speech in the Kremlin on March 18 – the day of Russia’s formal annexation of Crimea – Putin repeatedly used the ethnic term *Russkii*⁸ to refer to Russians living in Ukraine. He declared that “Crimea is primordial Russian land, and Sevastapol is a Russian city” (Putin 2014).⁹ He also added that: “Kiev is the mother of Russian cities,”¹⁰ and that after the collapse of the Soviet Union:

⁸ In the Russian language, the term *Russkii* traditionally denotes an ethnic marker of nationality, as opposed to *Rossiiskii*, which denotes a civic and more inclusive definition.

⁹ The original Russian from Putin’s speech, which uses the term *Russkii*, are noted below: Крым – это исконно русская земля, а Севастополь – русский город.

¹⁰ Киев – мать городов русских.

Millions of Russian went to sleep in one country and woke up in another, instantly finding themselves ethnic minorities in the former republics of the Union, and the Russian people became one of the largest, if not the largest, divided nation in the world (ibid)¹¹

For Kazakhstan, which has a large Russian minority (21.47 per cent of the population), mainly concentrated in its north, this unexpected redrawing of inter-state boundaries on the grounds of ethnicity became an issue of great concern. These fears were heightened in August 2014 when Putin suggested that the country was "part of the large Russian world," and that Kazakh President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, had "done a unique thing. He created a state in a territory that had never had a state before. The Kazakhs had no statehood" (Traynor 2014).

Nazarbayev was quick to respond, emphatically declaring that: "Our independence is our dearest treasure," while issuing his own threat that "Kazakhstan will not be part of organisations that pose a threat to our independence" (ibid). In October 2014, he also announced that Kazakhstan would hold in the following year events to celebrate the 550th anniversary of Kazakh statehood (Orazgaliyeva 2014). Alongside such symbolic assertions of independence, in March 2015, and after sharp falls in the value of the rouble, Kazakhstan suspended certain fuel and gas imports from Russia in order to protect its domestic market from "a surplus of Russian oil products" (Boguslavskaya 2015, 11). Kazakhstan's long-standing belief that participation in the Eurasian Union should not preclude participation in other integration models (Shevtsova 2014, 60) was also restated on December 21, 2015, with the signing in Astana of an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Kazakhstan and the EU (Anon 2015c). This came shortly after Nazarbaev had signed in Beijing in September 2015 a declaration of coordination between China's One Belt One Road initiative and Kazakhstan's national infrastructure development program, Nurly Zhol (Gabuev 2015a).

It had been during a visit to Astana in September 2013 that the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, first proposed the idea of creating the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)(Anon 2013a). Just two months later, Xi stated that the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) would begin operations in late 2015, and together with China's "Silk Road Fund," would play an important role in financing infrastructure projects, such as region-wide transportation networks, pipelines, electricity facilities, and telecommunications (ibid). The allure of cross-border investment from China into Central Asia was quickly and strikingly revealed at a meeting of the Heads of Governments of the CIS held in Ashkhabad, Turkmenistan, in November 2014. During the meeting, the Russian newspaper *Gazeta* noted that the reestablishment of a Great Silk Road is "constantly slipped into the speeches of officials, including in

¹¹ Миллионы русских легли спать в одной стране, а проснулись за границей, в одночасье оказались национальными меньшинствами в бывших союзных республиках, а русский народ стал одним из самых больших, если не сказать, самым большим разделённым народом в мире.

the welcoming remarks of the President of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov” (Orlov and Falyakhov 2014).

In a recognition of the inevitability of China’s investment in Central Asia, Putin signed in May 2015 a number of documents with Xi Jinping during the latter’s visit to Moscow, which included a declaration concerning Russia and China’s willingness “to make coordinated efforts toward the integration of constructing [the] EEU and SREB” in keeping with “the principles of transparency, mutual respect, equality, and complementation of different integration mechanisms” (Gabuev 2015). Despite Putin reiterating at this meeting that China was Russia’s “key strategic partner” (ibid), Alexander Gabuev has noted that, for the Russian leadership, this agreement came as the result of painful internal discussions, which concluded that the benefits of coordinating the EEU alongside the Silk Road initiative outweighed the risks (2016b).

While the opportunities offered by combining the EEU and the Silk Road initiative have been seized upon by politicians in Russia’s regions, such as the Governor of Orenburg region, Yuri Berg, (Anon 2015e, 2015f), and the Governor of Chelyabinsk region, Boris Dubrovsky (Anon 2015b), there has also been a widely held feeling that connecting the two projects has so far fallen short of expectations (Xin 2016, 3). As already noted, the value of trade with China collapsed in 2015, while to date, China’s Silk Road Fund has participated in just one transaction - its 9.9 per cent stake in Yamal LNG (Gabuev 2016b). It has also been suggested that given the high levels of protectionism in both Russia and the Central Asian states, the idea of a free trade zone between the EEU and China is a very distant prospect (Gabuev, 2015). In addition, it was significant that Russia was the only party to sign the coordination agreement with China in May 2015, on behalf of the EEU, and that the Eurasian Economic Commission appeared to play no role in drafting this document (ibid). It served to vividly demonstrate to the EEU’s non-Russian members their role in this organisation, as well as the extent to which Asia’s largest economy has assumed a remarkable salience in framing the scope of Russia’s integrationist ambitions, and its geopolitical aspirations in post-Soviet space and beyond.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to briefly sketch how the reconfiguration of Russia’s inter-state borders in Eurasia are being rationalised through two distinct vectors: one which privileges modernisation, cross-border flows, and is framed in terms of integration with the global economy; and an alternative, which is connected to geopolitical imperatives and a response to shifts in Russia’s relationship with the West. The paper has traced the existence of these two distinct narratives on integration in the rhetoric and speeches of the political leadership, as well as in the

policy initiatives of the government. At times complementary, these competing world-views have furthered cross-border flows and investment, yet at the same time they have also thrown up new contradictions and concerns. In this way, rather than a teleological end point towards resolving tensions over defining Russia's place in the world, they have created a myriad of fresh contradictions and inconsistencies (see Richardson, 2015, p.90). Recognising this dialectic process to regional integration can offer us new analytical insights and possibilities for understanding the unpredictable and uncertain reshaping of Russia's borders.

In the case of the Eurasian Economic Union, the internal borders of Eurasia are framed as dissipating according to both the logic of neo-liberal orthodoxy, and according to the supposedly shared cultural, historical, and political values of its member states. This paper has also traced the immense investment of material and discursive energies into Russia's integration into the Asia-Pacific region. This was symbolised most vividly by APEC 2012 in Vladivostok and an attempt to realise Russia's urgent national development goals through opening borders to markets, technological transfers, infrastructural development, tourism, and cross-border investment from the economies of the Asia-Pacific.

However, both these initiatives have been increasingly characterised by geopolitical imperatives, which have led to a rhetorical and material broadening and deepening of a relationship with China. It is a process that appears to have more to do with geopolitical expediency – and a response to worsening relations with the West – than neo-liberal economics and the rationale of the market. It is in the reconfiguration of Russia's Eurasian borders to flows of goods, capital, services, and people that the dialectic nature of the policies and strategies of the current leadership are strikingly revealed. Caught between geopolitics, globalisation, and nationalism, the political projects of the Eurasian Economic Union and Russia's turn to Asia have served to integrate and isolate Russia in the most unexpected ways.

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