UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM
University of Birmingham Research at Birmingham

The Myth of Eurasia - A Mess of Regions

Smith, Jeremy; Richardson, Paul

DOI:
10.1080/08865655.2016.1266276

License:
Other (please specify with Rights Statement)

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Smith, J & Richardson, P 2017, 'The Myth of Eurasia - A Mess of Regions', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 1-6. https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2016.1266276

Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal

Publisher Rights Statement:
This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal of Borderlands Studies on 22/03/2017, available online: http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/08865655.2016.1266276.

General rights
Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

•Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
•Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
•User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
•Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy
While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

Download date: 18. Apr. 2024

Paul Richardson and Jeremy Smith

Special Issue Journal of Borderland Studies

From Post-Soviet to Eurasian? Reconfiguring borders and space:

Introduction: The Myth of Eurasia – a Mess of Regions

Special Issue Journal of Borderland Studies

From Post-Soviet to Eurasian? Reconfiguring borders and space:

Introduction: The Myth of Eurasia – A Mess of Regions

In his presidential address to the Annual Convention of the newly renamed Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) in 2011, Bruce Grant proclaimed 'We are all Eurasian.' While eschewing any geographical definition of Eurasia (instead characterised as a set of 'continually shifting alignments'), Grant points to the possibilities of Eurasia acting effectively as a geopolitical concept which might, had history unfolded differently, have been the concrete expression of Mikhail Gorbachev's 'Common European Home' (Grant 2012). Grant's address, and the renaming of ASEEES which inspired it, reflected a trend for area studies centres on the region to incorporate the term 'Eurasia' into their titles in place of other designators such as 'Russian and East European'.

Thus, in a move which also reflected the incorporation of parts of the former communist world into the European Union, the fifty year old Centre for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Birmingham recently renamed itself the Centre for Russian, European and Eurasian Studies – allowing it to retain the acronym CREES. Similarly, the Slavic Research Center at Hokkaido University in Japan renamed itself in 2014, the year before its 60th anniversary, to the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center. Meanwhile, academic journals such as Eurasian Geography and Economics (renamed in 2002), the Journal of Eurasian Studies (2011), Eurasia Border Review (2010), and Eurasian Business Review (2011) have added momentum to this movement.

The turn towards the term 'Eurasia' is also evident in the region itself, where it reflects new regional alignments, most notably in the title of the Eurasian Economic Union (2011), and earlier the Eurasian Development Bank (2006). In these formulations, Eurasia is an idea, as well as a geographic signifier, suggesting something other to Europe.

Politicians and thinkers from the region, as well as external commentators, may have a variety of reasons for turning to the term Eurasia. The fact that they increasingly do so suggests that the term itself is loaded with political connotations, and therefore begs the question as to whether it serves scholarship better than any other term. As Stephen Hutchings noted in a foreword to a recent volume dealing with Eurasia, 'it is no coincidence that there is as yet no consensus on how the region covering the nations that emerged from the rubble of the Soviet Union should be referred to. "Former Soviet Union," "Post-Soviet Space", "Eurasia", "Commonwealth of Independent States" have all vied with one another for dominance, yet none has managed to prevail' (Hutchings, 2016). In practice these terms are used interchangeably in many contexts, referring to the fifteen states internationally

recognised as successors to the Soviet Union, often with the proviso that one or other group (often the three Baltic states) is excluded. But as Hutchings goes on to argue 'each name is saturated with ideological significance and proves objectionable to one or other nation'.

One argument attached to 'Eurasia' is that there are a number of problems with its most widely recognised predecessor: 'post-Soviet space'. Most of the countries that succeeded the Soviet Union are not, for self-evident reasons, keen on being defined according to their Soviet past. A quarter of a century after the end of the Soviet Union, there are increasingly fewer contexts in which it makes sense to talk about the entire group of post-Soviet states. Already, more often than not, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are not discussed in the same breath as the other former Soviet states, while Georgia is also largely an exception. The group that is clearly still orientated in most respects around Russia, and even includes some leaders of Soviet vintage, consists of, at times, only Belarus, but more regularly also Armenia, Kazakhstan, and perhaps Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. At least since 2014, Ukraine has become its own, special case.

The remaining context where there is a case for using the term 'post-Soviet' is where all or a group of the relevant states are being described or analysed in a sense where the Soviet legacy is seen as playing a significant role. But the path dependency that this implies is now being widely challenged. Vladimir Gel'man (2015) has stressed that agency of political actors has played a more significant role in determining the structural and legitimising features of Russia and other Eurasian states. As an example of this, Dave Siegel (2014) has shown how early political choices in the 1990s explain the divergence in systems of regional administration in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, in spite of their proximity and shared Soviet heritage. 'Post-Soviet' stresses the Soviet legacy and discourages paying attention to specific and incidental factors which provide alternative understandings.

However, the current, and more fashionable, term 'Eurasia' is also loaded, but in a different way. It implies a certain unity of the region, in a political as well as a cultural sense. The significance of Eurasia as an object in geopolitics, economics, or political thought has been well discussed in academic literature (see, for example: Glebov 2008; Lane and Samokhvalov 2015; Laruelle, 2008; Shnirelman 2009; Suslov and Bassin 2016). Scholars of the idea of Eurasia often recognise that it has little coherence: 'As a "big idea", the whole notion is riven by contradiction' (Sakwa 2015). And yet its uptake as a 'big idea' involves acceptance that those contradictions can somehow be overcome, that the region, however defined, makes some sense politically, complete with a shared economic legacy and cultural affinity.

In this collection we suggest that approaching Eurasia from the perspective of its external, internal, and sub state borders provides alternative perspectives which have been suggested but rarely developed in other studies. Do the states which used to make up the Soviet Union have more in common with each other than with their European or Asian neighbours? Is the term Eurasia of use beyond a purely geographic signifier? As a concept, is Eurasia merely adding to the intellectual incoherence in the analysis of this region?

These are different questions from asking whether Eurasia has a meaningful existence in a historical, cultural, or linguistic sense. From a social anthropology point of view, Chris Hann has argued forcefully that three millennia of common history, extensive communication, and a shared commitment to the values of social welfare, most recently expressed in two variants (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist on the one hand, electoral on the other hand) of socialism bind together a Eurasia which can be understood in a much broader geographical sense than is the common usage. Hann is convinced that this 'unity-in-civilizational-diversity of Eurasia can provide a base for global political cooperation' (2016).

But for Eurasia to function as a meaningful object of study in any field, let alone provide global leadership in the way Hann calls for, a certain level of geopolitical cohesion is required. Significant regional cooperation demands a relative openness of the internal borders of Eurasia themselves, as well as definable regional borders.

Therefore, the perspective here is not on what Eurasia actually means or is intended to mean, but whether and in what respects it functions as an effective space – geopolitically or heuristically. This collection of articles turns the question of defining Eurasia on its head. By focussing on borders – from the administrative borders within individual states, through international borders, the borders of multilateral groupings such as the Commonwealth of Independent States or the Eurasian Economic Union, to much broader notions of spatial bordering such as the Pacific or Eurasia itself – it asks the question: 'What is Eurasia to Us?'

This formulation – with its focus on how an understanding of Eurasia is contingent on when, where, and who is imagining it – reveals a multi-scalar, multi-perspective Eurasia, and one that is shaped by, and on, its peripheries. While the external borders of Eurasia, especially from the perspective of Russia, appear to be expanding and signifying a space embracing Pacific, Asian and European regions, when we look more closely at its borders a contrary picture emerges: the region of the South Caucasus has, even during the late Soviet period, been internally divided along state, sub state and ethnic lines in spite of a broadly shared culture. Not only are two of its three recognised states in a state of suspended (and at times actual) war, and three unrecognised states continue to exist, but countries are internally divided and have failed throughout history to achieve any kind of regional coordination (de Waal 2013).

Central Asia has, to the frustration of international policy makers, failed to act as a region since 1991. There are some signs that this trend is being reversed, with growing diplomatic and transport links evident between four of the five Central Asian states, which are also embracing Iran and Afghanistan (there are even signs that the exception, Uzbekistan, is joining into this closer integration process since the death of Islam Karimov). There is also growing cooperation between the Caspian littoral states though much of this is in response to Russia's plans for the Sea, which also brings Azerbaijan into the picture. A process of Central Asian integration and the region as a bridge between the Turkic, European, and Asian worlds is spearheaded by Kazakhstan. However, this view of the aspiring leader of the region is visioned against the background of the rise of China and the waning of Russian hegemony

over the region, suggesting a new, and perhaps, competing configuration of borders, sovereignty, and space.

As the articles in this volume demonstrate, other aspects of broader regional integration show a greater tendency to fail than to succeed. The ideological visions of Eurasia advanced by certain Russian thinkers are internally incoherent, oppose each other, and find little real reflection in Russian policies (Richardson); Russia itself, which makes up a good portion of Eurasian space, is constructed as a federation but does not act effectively as one, lending a strong ambiguity to its internal borders (Busygina); the Union of Belarus and Russia has been full of contradictions which are repeated in the Eurasian Economic Union (Vieira). And for Armenia, two of its external borders remain as closed as any borders of the Cold War (Cheterian). If regions do not function as regions, if the major federation does not work as a federation, if a Union of supposed equals does not in practice work as one, and if borders remain subject to arbitrary redetermination from day to day, what hope of Eurasia existing as a truly meaningful single space?

When we first embarked on this project, we asked a question which seemed reasonable and relevant at that moment, and which was similar to the questions already posed by Bruce Grant and others: was it time to stop talking about the region comprising Russia and its immediate neighbourhood as 'post-Soviet space', and instead to start talking about 'Eurasia'? Such a terminological shift would reflect both the diversity differentiating the post-Soviet countries some time after they had embarked down different paths, and the unity in other respects of a region which went well beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union or Russian Empire. The development of (what was then) the Eurasian Customs Union embracing part of the former Soviet space, the emergence of China as a major player in its immediate neighbourhood of Central Asia and well beyond, and the Putinist vision of a multipolar world in which Russia would not only maintain its pre-eminence in its previous imperial domain, but would be both a European and a Pacific power, were all trends which led us to pose this question, albeit a rhetorical one. The answer, it was obvious, would be yes.

What has emerged, however, from this collection of articles is a quite different picture of Eurasia: far from being a significant ideational, geographic, economic and strategic space Eurasia, it turns out, is an incoherent mess of spaces. One reason that our initial hypothesis turned in such an unexpected direction is that, in the brief period between the conception and initial execution of this project, Russia annexed Crimea and the rest of Ukraine was split in two by a civil war, which seems now to be turning into the fifth 'frozen conflict' of the post-Soviet space. It must be stressed, however, that while the Ukraine crisis has certainly refocussed the perspective of all scholars of the region, for most of these articles the topics, the arguments, and the findings were developed irrespective of what happened in Ukraine, and in most cases preceded those events. Our findings are not, therefore, an *ex post facto* reflection of the post-Crimea world, but rather the product of analysis of a number of very different aspects and trajectories of post-Soviet bordering.

The internal bordering of Eurasia has further emphasised the extent to which this is not only an incoherent, but also a fluid and contingent space. Akihiro Iwashita argues that bordering is

to a large extent determined by the dictates of alliance building and maintenance. Irina Busygina shows that the internal bordering of the Russian Federation follows lines which are not normally associated with the functions of federalism, but which, like the external borders, are manipulated according to political expediency. While Paul Richardson's paper demonstrates how the de-bordering initiatives promoted by the Eurasian Economic Union, and Russia's Turn to Asia, are both consolidated and countered by geopolitical manoeuvres and political expediency.

Hann's call for an alternative to an Atlanticist vision of the world based on 'the historically shaped commonalities of Eurasia and their legacy' (Hann 2016) seems even more remote from reality today than ever before. A unity that the Romans, the Mongols, and the Soviet Union aspired to through conquest and coercion appears equally beyond the kind of consensus or negotiation that we see today. Indeed, the idea that 'shared values' would provide the bedrock for regional peace as well as the forward march of democracy and economic development, the central idea of the European Union's European Neigbourhood Policy since the early 2000s, has proved drastically ill-founded. Even before the Ukraine crisis, as James Scott shows in this volume, the 'ENP has not elicited sufficient engagement from its neighbours and the aspirations of the EU and its regional cooperation partners have not been met. Instead, the competition over whose 'values' Ukraine would share has contributed to a country divided, soaked in the blood of civil war, and in economic ruin. It is a grave warning to any political project trying to essentialise and impose a myth of European or Eurasian values.

The latest effort to provide some kind of cohesion to Eurasia is China's 'One Belt, One Road' project. Chinese leaders go out of their way to avoid the kind of essentialism and hegemonic aspiration that earlier projects have suffered from. The One Belt, One Road is conceived in terms of transport connectivity rather than integration, and is explicitly portrayed as not presenting any threats to national sovereignty as a deliberate strategy to avoid some of the difficulties that have dogged other integration projects (Ferdinand 2016). Nevertheless, the regular fractures that characterise the integration efforts discussed in this volume must raise doubts as to whether the project will succeed in overcoming the numerous borders (real and metaphorical) that lie in its path.

The articles in this special edition have traced some of the grand Eurasian visions of state elites and ideologues. These geographical visions strive towards articulating a new continentalism with Eurasia at its heart. However, these are representations of space which reveal a widening chasm between Eurasian rhetoric and everyday reality. The myth of Eurasia, intimately tied to state-building, national identity visions, and the desire to order political space, is described and also exposed in these papers. We have brought together perspectives focussed on central nodes of power in Eurasia, alongside perspectives from the margins. Through this approach any singular notion of Eurasia is shattered, and instead it emerges as ephemeral, shifting, and somehow always beyond our grasp. Instead we find a Eurasia of myriad forms, shaped by ideologies and identities, defined by inconsistencies and incoherence.

This collection of articles came from a recognition that a quarter of a century after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the term 'post-Soviet' had lost whatever currency and meaning it had once had. The volume traces a discursive shift from post-Soviet to Eurasia amongst policy elites, academics, and public intellectuals. However, with this revisioning of post-Soviet space we have also seen in these articles how the borders of 'Eurasia' rematerialise and dematerialise at every scale. These articles have fractured the Eurasian prism of looking at this region, and suggest that such a meta-narrative serves little more than to obfuscate and obscure the multiple polities, communities, characteristics, and dynamics of this region. Rather than one Eurasia, we find a region of multiple Eurasias, which transcend and remake borders. From this collection has emerged a world of Eurasias, and with it a region that will continue to be shaped by alternate and competing visions of Eurasian space and place.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bassin, Mark, Sergey Glebov and Marlene Laruelle (eds). 2015. *Between Europe and Asia: The Origins, Theories, and Legacies of Russian Eurasianism*. Pittsburgh. University of Pittsburgh Press.

Ferdinand, Peter. 2016. 'Westward ho – the China dream and "one belt, one road": Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping'. *International Affairs* 92: 4, 941–957.

Gel'man, Vladimir. 2016. 'The Vicious Circle of Post-Soviet Neopatrimonialism in Russia'. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32:5, 455-473.

Glebov, Sergey. 2008. 'Wither Eurasia: History of Ideas in an Imperial Situation', *Ab Imperio* 2: 345-376.

Grant, Bruce. 2012. 'We are all Eurasian'. *Newsnet*. January. V.52, n.1. 1-6.

Hutchings, Stephen. 2016. 'Foreword'. In Mikhail Suslov and Mark Bassin (eds). *Eurasia 2.0: Russian Geopolitics in the Age of New Media*. Lanham: Lexington Books, xiii-xvi.

Lane, David and V. Samokhvalov (eds). 2015. *The Eurasian Project and Europe: Regional Discontinuities and Geopolitics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Laruelle, Marlene. 2008. *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire*. Washington: Woodrow Wilson Press.

Hann, Chris. 2016. 'A Concept of Eurasia'. *Current Anthropology*. Vol.57, no.1: 1-10.

Sakwa, Richard. 2015. 'Eurasian Integration: A Project for the 21st Century?' In David Lane and V. Samokhvalov (eds). *The Eurasian Project and Europe: Regional Discontinuities and Geopolitics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 53-71.

Shnirelman, Viktor. 2009. 'To Make a Bridge: Eurasian Discourse in the Post-Soviet World, *Anthropology of East Europe Review*. 27, no. 2

Siegel, Dave. 2014. ‘Post-Soviet State Formation in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: The Politics of Regional Appointment’. IREX Scholar Research Brief. https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/IREX_2014FinalReport_DSiegel.pdf

Suslov, Mikhail and Mark Bassin (eds). 2016. *Eurasia 2.0: Russian Geopolitics in the Age of New Media*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

de Waal, Thomas. 2014. ‘A Broken Region;: The Persistent Failure of Integration Projects in the South Caucasus’. In Nino Kemoklidze, Cerwyn Moore, Jeremy Smith and Galina Yemelianova (eds). Many Faces of the Caucasus. London: Routledge. Europe-Asia Studies Series. 99-113.