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Eurasian integration and the development of Asiatic Russia

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Russia's strategic objective of developing its Asiatic regions is tied to its serious intentions in Asia as a whole. It stresses that Russia can only connect to the political, economic, and cultural life of Eurasia and the Asia-Pacific through its own Asian regions. Moreover, leaders' claims that Russia belongs to both Europe and Asia will carry little weight with their Asiatic neighbors if Russia's own Asiatic regions remain underdeveloped and subject to shrinking populations. The paper critically analyzes the results of various projects of development of Asiatic Russia beginning from late tsarist period until the 21st century and shows that Russia needs to put forward a formal strategy for developing the Eurasian infrastructure that is comparable to the SREB, Kazakhstan's NurlyZhol (Bright Path) economic stimulus plan, Mongolia's Steppe Road, and others. This strategy should reflect Russia's objectives for the economic development of its own Asiatic regions, and through them, the co-development with its neighbors of Eurasia generally. It argues that the Trans-Eurasian Belt Development, put forward by several Russia think tanks, could become Russia's contribution to the development of the Eurasian space and mesh with the Chinese, Kazakh, Mongolian, and other partner initiatives. Its implementation would help spur the economic development of Asiatic Russia, enabling that region to become part of the larger economic development of Eurasia. That would help turn Russia into a more important independent and constructive player in the Eurasian space, acting in close coordination with its partners in both the East and the West.

Russia's strategic objective of developing its Asiatic regions is tied to its serious intentions in Asia as a whole. After all, Russia can only connect to the political, economic, and cultural life of Eurasia and the Asia-Pacific through its own Asian regions. Moreover, leaders' claims that Russia belongs to both Europe and Asia will carry little weight with their Asiatic neighbors if Russia's own Asiatic regions remain underdeveloped and subject to shrinking populations.

In fact, Asiatic Russia is less developed because the country has focused for centuries on developing its European part while relegating the Asiatic to an auxiliary or supporting role. Only after Russia recently understood that its opportunities in the West had become severely limited did this situation begin to change.

1. Programs for developing Asiatic Russia – A checkered history

Russia's political, economic, and cultural activity has focused on the Western part of the country for many long centuries – or at least dating from the time of Peter the

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Great. And, despite the fact that the greater part of its territory lay in Asia, Russia's Asian policy was seen as ancillary to its European policy. This explains why Asiatic Russia remains relatively underdeveloped economically and underpopulated.

Of course, leaders during the country's tsarist, Soviet, and modern periods have made efforts to accelerate the development of the Eastern regions. However, affairs in the Western part often consumed most of their attention, leaving little time or energy for the east.

During tsarist times, the largest and most successful programs for developing Siberia and the Far East were the construction in 1891–1916 of the Trans-Siberian Railway, which was initially called "The Great Siberian Railway," ("Stroitel'stvo. Velikij Sibirskij put 1891–1916,") (along with the China Eastern Railway branch line through Northern Manchuria) linking Moscow with Vladivostok, and the resettlement policy of Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin. Economic and political considerations played a significant role in both, including the desire to harness the wealth of Siberia and the Far East, to give the peasant population of European Russia land and an opportunity to cultivate it, and concerns that Russia might otherwise find it impossible to retain its Asiatic territories. Speaking of the Russian Far East in a speech to the State Duma in 1908, Stolypin said, "Our remote and harsh outlying regions are rich – rich in gold, rich in timber, rich in furs, rich in vast lands suitable for cultivation. And under such circumstances, gentlemen, with a densely populated neighboring state, these regions will not remain uninhabited. Foreigners will enter therein if Russians do not get there first – and this slow creep has already begun. If we sleep lethargically, those regions will become home to other peoples, and when we awaken, they might turn out to be Russian in name only" (Stolypin, 1916, pp. 132–133). The Stolypin resettlement program offered numerous benefits to those willing to move to Siberia: government-paid travel expenses, a non-repayable loan of 100–200 rubles depending on the area of resettlement, and preliminary land surveys. The government also built schools, paramedic stations, and roads in those regions. As a result, more than 3 million men (no tally was taken of women and children) moved east of the Urals between 1906 and 1914, providing a major boost to the region's socio-economic development (Belyanin, 2012).

During the initial period after the devastation caused by the civil war, the Soviet government placed its bets on attracting foreign capital to develop Asiatic Russia. Never before had those regions been linked to the world economy as they were in the first half of the 1920s. In 1923, for example, foreign capital held 57.9% of the industrial enterprises of the Far East, and those establishments produced 50% of the region's industrial output. The Soviet government began making concessions whereby it received the funds necessary to reinvigorate the economy and industry without having to make any additional investment. However, by the late 1920s, the new economic policy was halted and the concessions were canceled (Plokhikh & Kovaleva, 2002, pp. 175–176).

After adopting the policy of accelerated industrialization based on domestic resources, there could be no talk of broad interaction with neighboring states. The new policy was formulated in the resolutions of the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union (CEC) and the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) on the economic development of the Far East. It aimed to increase the rate of industrial development and create a domestic economic complex independent of outside factors that would be capable of provisioning the Soviet armed forces in the event of what was considered an inevitable armed conflict. As noted by Pavel Minakir and Olga Prokapalo – two economists specializing in the Russian Far East – from 1932 onward, "the Soviet Union began a massive redistribution of its resources toward the Far East, investing 7 billion rubles in its economy, or 6.8 times more than had been invested in the previous five years. That investment was focused not on export resource industries, but on entirely new ones – shipbuilding, chemicals, automotive repair, energy, oil refining, the fuel industry, and nonferrous metallurgy. The transport infrastructure grew especially quickly, with investment in this area increasing by 4700% in 1928–1932. As a result, industrial production increased by 335% and heavy industry by 430%. The Far East transformed from an agrarian into a super-industrial region in which industry accounted for more than 80% of gross output (Minakir & Prokapalo, 2017, pp. 10–11).

A growth in population was achieved through forced resettlement, primarily of prisoners. During Stalin's years in power, prison labor contributed significantly to the development of Asiatic Russia, which itself was used primarily as a storehouse of mineral wealth that was mined for the needs of industries located primarily in European Russia – and as a means for covering miscellaneous budget expenses. In 1934, the State Trust for Road and Industrial Construction in the upper Kolyma (Dalstroy) – established three years earlier by decision of the Council of Labor and Defense of the Soviet Union – was handed over to the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD). Despite its modest moniker, Dalstroy was set up as a comprehensive organization responsible for all aspects of life in the Far East, from industry to culture. At its disposal were approximately 100 labor camps with thousands of prisoners, most of whom had been convicted for political crimes according to Article 58 of the Russian Federation Penal Code. Enjoying no rights, they constituted an enormous pool of free labor that was pressed into service to construct roads, mine gold and other minerals, and build cities and enterprises (Plokhikh & Kovaleva, 2002, pp. 181–182). Entire cities such as Taishet, Magadan, Nakhodka, and Igarka arose and developed as administrative and holding centers for the system of labor camps. Similar organizations answered for other parts of Asiatic Russia: Siblag (Western Siberia), Bamlag (responsible for construction of the Baikal-Amur Railway), and so on (Papkov, 1996). The exploitation of unjustly convicted prisoners with the ostensible goal of helping the regions and developing their economies led to countless deaths from starvation and freezing for the sake of abstract goals and prompted predatory individuals with power to plunder those areas' riches.

During the Second World War, industries in European Russia were evacuated eastward, contributing to the industrial development of that region. After the war's end, the fishing industry became a high priority. In 1948, the Council

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