



# The construction of ‘geopolitical spaces’ in Russian foreign policy discourse before and after the Ukraine crisis



David Svarin

Department of War Studies, School of Social Science and Public Policy, King's College London, Strand, WC2R 2LS London, UK

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 8 March 2015  
Accepted 18 November 2015  
Available online 20 April 2016

### Keywords:

Russia  
foreign policy  
geopolitical imagination  
Eurasia  
Ukraine

## ABSTRACT

Focusing on discourses by the ruling elite, this article examines the construction of ‘geopolitical spaces’ in Russian foreign policy. Based on a critical geopolitical analysis, suggesting that territory, space and geographies are being actively (re)formulated by those in power, this article analyzes how policy-makers define and articulate the importance of a particular geographical region for their foreign policy. It analyzes how the three ‘geopolitical spaces’ – Eurasia, the Euro-Atlantic and the Asia-Pacific – are defined by Russia’s political leaders and how each space fulfils a particular function for the pursuit of Russian interests abroad. In a second part, this article takes into account the events in and around Ukraine starting in late 2013 and analyzes how Russia’s discourse toward the traditional ‘geopolitical spaces’ changed as a result. It is argued, that while Russia previously strived for membership in each of the three ‘geopolitical spaces’, the Ukraine crisis and its impact on Moscow’s relation with the West led to a reorientation of Russia’s geopolitical vision toward the East and most importantly toward Eurasia. The establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union was instrumental for the promotion of a new vision of wider Eurasian integration.

Copyright © 2016 Production and hosting by Elsevier Ltd on behalf of Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

This article focuses on the importance of ‘space’ and geopolitical arguments in the formulation of a country’s foreign policy. It is embedded in wider debates around the importance of geography and space in international relations (Starr, 2013a). The concentration lies on foreign policy as a discursive practice, meaning that each country defines and constructs ‘geopolitical spaces’ which are crucial in the pursuit of its national interests. Based on a critical geopolitical analysis, suggesting that territory, space and geographies are being actively (re)formulated by those in power, this article analyzes how policy-makers define and

articulate the importance of a particular geographical region for their foreign policy. At the center of this article is an analysis of Russian foreign policy discourse allowing us to depict the principal geopolitical regions with which Russia interacts as well as their respective importance for Moscow.

This article examines the construction of ‘geopolitical spaces’ in Russian foreign policy since Vladimir Putin became President in 2000. It analyzes the way in which the three principal ‘geopolitical spaces’ in Russian foreign policy – Eurasia, the Euro-Atlantic and the Asia-Pacific – are defined by the political leadership in Moscow.<sup>1</sup> In a second step, this article analyzes how this traditional geopolitical imagination changed in reaction to the events in Ukraine starting in late 2013, and with the implementation of the Eurasian

Department of War Studies, School of Social Science and Public Policy, King's College London, Strand, WC2R 2LS London, UK.

E-mail address: [david.svarin@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:david.svarin@kcl.ac.uk).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2015.11.002>

1879-3665/Copyright © 2016 Production and hosting by Elsevier Ltd on behalf of Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

<sup>1</sup> See also a similar study, with a different sample and methodology, by Ambrosio and Vandrovec (2013).

(Economic) Union. It is argued that the crisis in Ukraine and the subsequent deterioration of relations between Russia and the West left a decisive imprint on the way in which the geopolitical imagination of Russia's leaders evolved.

Russia's political elite considers the country to be a member of and important actor in each of the three geopolitical spaces. For Moscow, 'membership' in each of these regions is a condition for maintaining its status as a great power in the international system. With this in mind, foreign policy discourses are a flexible means of readjusting Russia's geopolitical vision in accordance with the general shifts and new tendencies in global affairs. Discourses precisely fulfill the function to appropriate the sovereignty over matters of definition of particular spaces and places and to frame Russian membership in each of these geopolitical spaces.

In a first step, the article briefly presents the advantages offered by critical geopolitics in analyzing foreign policy and especially discourses by policy-makers. After a brief background discussion on Russian foreign policy, the article will move to the core of the analysis by presenting the political elite's geopolitical discourse on Eurasia, the Euro-Atlantic and the Asia-Pacific region. Thereafter, this article reflects upon the implications of the Ukraine Crisis for Russia's geopolitical imagination and draws preliminary conclusions on the current and future orientation of Russian foreign policy.

## 2. Critical geopolitics and foreign policy

This article focuses on the geopolitical vision of Russia's political elite and the discourses of these "intellectuals of statecraft" (O Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). The subsequent analysis is based on speeches and interviews by prominent political leaders with a responsibility for external affairs, as well as the three foreign policy concepts (FPC) of 2000, 2008 and 2013.<sup>2</sup> The collected material has been analyzed qualitatively rather than quantitatively in the sense that the article works with direct quotes from speeches and documents.

The analysis herein focuses on the construction of 'geopolitical spaces'. While acknowledging given geographical and territorial realities, this article argues that with regard to foreign policy practice, personal conceptions and interpretations of these realities play a crucial role. Hence, "geography is 'dynamic' in that the meaning of space, distance, territory, and borders can change in the perceptions of peoples and foreign policy-making elites" (Starr, 2013b, p. 439; see also Agnew, 2003, pp. 2–3). This is particularly true in times of globalization, in which we see an increasing diffusion of power across various scales and places.

Critical geopolitics focuses on how "global space is incessantly reimagined and rewritten by centers of power and authority" (O Tuathail, 1996, p. 249; see also Dalby, 1991; Dodds, 2001; Kuus, 2010) and is interested in how geopolitical analysis functions as an aide in the conduct of a state's foreign policy. As Dodds argues, "the practice of foreign policy

is inherently geopolitical because it involves the construction of meaning and values of spaces and places" (Dodds, 1993, p. 71). It would be wrong, however, to assume that foreign policy is a stable practice. Instead, it continuously reproduces and reformulates state identity in response to changed perceptions and realities in the global system. In so doing, foreign policy becomes a state practice that aims at naming places in order to confer meaning upon them (Agnew, 2003; Campbell, 1992; Dijkink, 1996, pp. 11–15; O Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). As such, discourses are understood here as important parts of policy-making practices through which a country's interests and policies are defined and justified, both internally and externally (Bassin, 2004, 621; Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006; Müller, 2008; O Tuathail, 2002, pp. 605–607; O Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, pp. 192–193). As such, discourses are both a tool for policy, in that they are programmatic and present a vision, as well as a cause of policy, by being reactive and trying to make sense of political actions. Since "geopolitical reasoning operates through the active simplification of the complex reality of places in favor of controllable geopolitical abstractions" (Agnew & Corbridge, 1995, pp. 48–49), analyzing the construction of the Eurasia, Euro-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific 'geopolitical spaces' in the discursive practices of Russia's leaders sheds light on Russia's official geopolitical vision of its place in the international system.

## 3. The foundations of Russian foreign policy

This study is grounded in the tradition of practical geopolitics, which focuses on the political elite, and thus omits a range of other actors that equally influence Russia's geopolitical imagination. There is already a wide variety of scholarship focusing for instance on the writings of prominent academics (Tsygankov, 2003) or the examination of geopolitical perceptions of ordinary Russians and popular ideas about Russia's place in the world (O'Loughlin, O'Tuathail, & Kolossov, 2006; O'Loughlin & Talbot, 2005). In addition to these studies, especially the work of Ted Hopf (2002) and Anne Clunan (2009) is particularly instructive in its engagement with the role of identity in Russian foreign policy.

The starting point for this study is Vladimir Putin's accession to the Russian presidency in 2000. The following section therefore provides some historical background and a brief overview of the debates related to Russian identity and foreign policy in the 1990s.

The debate about the reorientation of Russian foreign policy already started under Mikhail Gorbachev and his policy of 'New Thinking' (Legvold, 1989; Mandelbaum, 1998, pp. 4–6); however, it reached its peak in the early 1990s during Boris Yeltsin's presidency. This was due to the fact that, as Ted Hopf argues, "Russia found itself between two different modern identities – that of the Soviet past and that of the western present" (Hopf, 2002, pp. 155–156). This opened the floor to debate among the many political factions about the meaning of the Russian nation and its place in the world. Andrei Tsygankov identified three schools of thought: Westernist, Statist and Civilizationist (Tsygankov, 2006, pp. 4–7; see also Tsygankov, 2005a). The Westernists emphasized "Russia's similarity with the West and viewed the West as the most viable and progressive civilization in

<sup>2</sup> The transcripts of the speeches have been obtained in English translation, in most cases directly from the websites of the President of Russia and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The sample includes speeches by Igor Ivanov, Sergey Ivanov, Sergey Lavrov, Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1127160>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1127160>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)