

A “quantitative” analysis of the geopolitical situation in Russia

“There exists an inseparable connection between geopolitics, iconography and political identity. Jean Gottmann was the first who in the early 1950s considered the importance of iconography in the creation of national and political identity. National iconography is a result of a long historical development of the perception by state leaders, public opinion and the intellectual elite of the place of a country in the world, its geopolitical situation, national interests, and external threats to national security.”

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Geopolitics in Russia: Old and new

Everybody in Russia knows about the famous discussion about “Slavophiles” and “Westernizers.” This discussion, which in Soviet times was familiar to Russian citizens from school textbooks on history, in the early 1990s became extremely relevant because it concerns the very basis of contemporary Russian life. Is Russia part of Europe or does it not even make sense trying to return to the European house after almost 75 years of separate existence? Or is Russia “Eurasia” and does it make up a particular integral world and civilization which organically combines features of European (Slavic) and Asian (Turkic) cultures? Or is she “Asiopoie” – their odd and chaotic combination? Or she is simply Asia? What should be the ground of the Russian state that emerged on the wreckage of a superpower? Does she have allies or is she condemned to geopolitical “loneliness”?

All these questions are really existential, and many spears have been broken around them during the last years of the 20th century. Journalists and politicians, philosophers and sociologists have published a lot on this theme. Of course, they remembered “classical” authors – thinkers of the past, whose writings, often forbidden in Soviet times, have been published again with abundant comments. They attempted to find in their heritage solutions to today’s problems. During the first decade after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, geopolitics in Russia was almost monopolized by the so-called national patriots and left-wing activists, who had been the most active in introducing its concepts and ideas. Leaders of a num-

ber of left and national patriotic political parties wrote a series of geopolitical books-manifestos, justifying their views on their perspectives of Russia.

The “neo-Eurasian” school claiming to be heirs of a long tradition in Russian philosophical and political thought (HAUNER, 1990) has created most concern in the Western media (CLOVER, 1999). As almost always happens with epigraphs, neo-Eurasianists simplified and primitivized the ideas and concepts of the founding fathers. In particular, the originators of the concept emphasized in their books the importance of the Mongol yoke period for Russia, that delimited the Russian cultural area by separating it from the Christian West and orienting the country towards the Finno-Ugrian, Siberian and “Turanian” worlds.

Neo-Eurasianists strongly criticize the process of economic and cultural globalization and view the general adoption of liberal democratic procedures and principles in Russia as imposed forcefully by the West. Neo-Eurasianists combine the ideas of G. Vernadsky and other members of his circle with some points from early European geopolitical writings.

They uncritically and unilaterally adopted Halford Mackinder’s theory of the world Heartland, as they believed that it endowed Russia with a particular geopolitical role. Even since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia occupies the main part of the heartland, termed by Mackinder as constituting the geographical pivot of history, the control of which would enable ultimate control of the “world island.” Not surprisingly, the thesis promoting Russia’s specific and “eternal” geopolitical role has been taken up by a large section of the Russian public, not least because it has served as a sort of psychological compensation for the dismantling of the empire and the rapid decline of the Cold War geopolitical status of the country.

Using the heartland theory has enabled Russians to predict a return to great power status simply because of their geographical location, without a need for any major effort on their part.

Contextually, some authors have suggested updating the Mackinder formula in the following way: “who controls the heartland possesses an efficient means to command world politics, by maintaining the geopolitical balance and the balance of power in the world.” The neo-Eurasianists remain a small group of intellectuals and have little chance to promote themselves into an influential social movement, because, first

of all, it is impossible to mobilize the Russian population on the basis of huge utopian projects, as was the case in the late 1920s and early 1930s and, to a lesser extent, during the three decades after World War II (KOLOSSOV and TUROVSKY, 2001). In May 1998, about two-thirds of the All-Russian Centre of Public Opinion (VTsIOM) respondents to a national survey declared that their family affairs were closer to them than the health of the country. Individual, pragmatic, "petit bourgeois" values now dominate among Russians (ECKERT and KOLOSSOV, 1999).

However, the influence of the neo-Eurasianist circle is much larger than their "direct" political strength. Their arguments are widely used by Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, which possessed the largest fraction in the State Duma between 1995 and 1999.

In Europe itself and in Western countries as a whole the economic gradient between east and west, which is to a large extent explained by natural factors, has for a long time been used for grounding and interpreting political theories and ambitions, looking for allies and enemies, distinguishing "us" and "them," as a powerful leverage for transforming and strengthening ethnic, national and supra-national identities. As Russian political scientist A. Miller noted, exercises with maps and borders aimed at defining the limits between the "civilized" and the "Barbarian" worlds are not new. Count Louis-Philippe de Ségur appointed ambassador of France to Saint Petersburg wrote in 1784 that he completely quit Europe when he crossed the border between Prussia and Poland.

Nowadays, of course, nobody doubts that Poland is a European country (MILLER, 1997). But there is a tendency to perpetuate the border between more "civilized" Central Europe kidnapped for a while from simply Europe by the communist USSR and still "Barbarian" Eastern Europe or between Eastern Europe and "Eurasia," i.e. Russia. Intellectuals of Central and Eastern European countries compete trying to prove that their country is truly European.

"Europeanness" is evidence of stability and reliability for political partners and an argument for knocking loudly on NATO doors, according to an expression of Eduard Shevardnadze, and taking soothing medicine against existential fears of aggression from the East, and a trump for attracting potential investors.

In other words, though borders between geopolitical and/or "civilizational" regions are inertial, they are not something given for ever by their very nature, but depend on historical circumstances and the collective will of peoples. There are social constructs interpreting contemporary borders between regions with different relationships between modernization, social innovations and traditionalism.

We believe that any analysis of the geopolitical situation should be based not on speculation but on a study of a system of concrete indicators reflecting, in particular, the numerous and rapidly changing relations between a country or a region and the external world. Such a system should certainly include international trade and financial flows related to payments for services and investments, transportation flows, which constitute a reliable and precise measure of the intensity of international contacts, flows of energy and pollutants, whose diffusion in the natural environment does not recognize political boundaries, phone traffic and, of course, flows of people – bearers of information and culture, permanent and temporary migrants, skilled specialists, public benefactors, statesmen, etc. It is difficult even to list all possible kinds of international interactions and quantitative parameters which can help to evaluate them.

This idea, first developed by Jean Gottmann, who designed different kinds of interactions between political-territorial units' "communication," was used as the basis of a study carried out in the Centre of Geopolitical Studies of the Institute of Geography

of the Russian Academy of Sciences thanks to the support of the Giovanni Agnelli Foundation (*La Collocazione Geopolitica della Russia*, 2001).

The main objective of the study was to compare representations about the geopolitical situation of Russia and contemporary Russian geopolitical concepts with the results of an analysis of concrete variables characterizing the relations between the country and the outside world. It is impossible to embrace all of them, and the authors selected a series of relevant statistical and other data which can help one to understand the changes in the situation of the country in the world that occurred after the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

The place of Russia is evaluated via the territorial distribution, the dynamics and the composition of her international trade, foreign investments, transportation flows and telecommunications.

Political contacts of the countries were described through an analysis of the geography of visits of Soviet/Russian leaders abroad and foreign statesmen to the USSR and Russia from the early 1980s until 2000. The growing interdependence between geopolitics and socio-cultural factors results in contacts among numerous ethnic and cultural communities dispersed in the world, and their historical motherland, between national Churches and their parishes and missions abroad. The authors investigated the contemporary number, self-identification and self-organizations of Russian communities abroad, the social and political role of the most important confessions of Russia in the field of international relations.

It is more difficult to "measure" the cultural "radiation" of a country, its image emerging among politicians and in the mass consciousness around the world, on the one hand, and the image of the world and the perception of neighbors in the country itself. However, in post-industrial times the quality of population and culture often become the most important and the "material" factors determining the geopolitical situation of a country. For example, Paul Claval (1994) believes that today they play the decisive role for France. There are a number of approaches in cultural geography allowing one to evaluate social representations. Naturally, studies of identity and of the role of geopolitical representations in it are impossible without sociological surveys.

The authors tried to study, first, the dynamic of representations about the place of Russia in the world, their regions and the outside world in the works of Russian poets of the 18th-20th centuries and in the titles of "abstract" musical works (i.e. not operas and ballets) by Russian and European composers of the same period. Second, they analyzed a series of surveys concerning Russian identity conducted by the All-Russian Centre of Public Opinion (VTsIOM) in recent years.

Let us briefly describe some results of the study. International trade and the movement of capital, first of all investments, are the main kind of foreign economic relations of any country. Andrei Treivish showed that Russia remained a kind of island in the globalizing economy, because even for a medium country her international trade turnover is not big. The per capita export (US\$ 470-600) is about ten times less than in Western Europe, though it is considerably more than in other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries. Since the disintegration of the USSR, Russia reoriented first her international trade relations to the "far abroad," though its role for the Russian Federation has been always more important than in other former Soviet republics. She depends more strongly on the CIS for imports. The ratio of Russia in the exchange with the "far abroad" in all of them is larger than their role in Russian trade. The share of former COMECON countries decreased sharply, while the ratio of developed countries exceeded two thirds.

The attraction of international trade not only of Russia and

other CIS countries as a whole but also of their regions to some main foreign partners is increasing, which resulted from the disintegration of interregional economic relations. Gravitation models, as well as an analysis of critical dependency of Russia on export and import of certain commodities from separate countries were used to evaluate this phenomenon.

It is known that foreign investments in Russia are not significant yet. Nadezhda Borodulina considered their distribution by types, branches and regions, and their relation with state private domestic investments, which were sharply decreasing in the 1990s. Direct foreign investments in the Russian economy, the most important for its revival, are distributed by territory extremely unevenly. In 1997, before the 1998 financial crisis, Moscow was by far the first (US\$ 354 per capita). Magadan and Sakhalin oblasts in the Far East followed with a large gap (US\$ 237 and 72 respectively). Since 1998, the picture has changed, though Moscow keeps its leadership. Western European countries are the main investors, and Germany was the first in their list (34.3 percent); the shares of the following three countries – the US, France and UK – were respectively 15.5, 15.0 and 12.7 percent.

An analysis of international tourism and transportation by Yelena Seredina and the author of the present paper demonstrated first, the growing openness of the country: more and more trains and regular flights and rapidly developing telecommunications reunite Russia with the outside world (fig. 1). Many airports acquired international status, though the lion's share of passenger traffic (73 percent of regular flights) still passes through the Moscow hub. Characteristically, Moscow airports and Pulkovo airport of Saint Petersburg now serve much more international communication than domestic connections, which is hardly normal for such a large country as Russia. Second, the transportation system of Russia, formerly isolated and

highly centralized, is to a growing extent oriented outside. The negative side of this process is that external connections are not balanced with internal ones. It can be partly compensated for by the development of telecommunications, which radically transform the notion of periphery.

As a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, about 25 million Russians suddenly found themselves to be outside Russian borders. Their former identity was being painfully transformed, because most of them are supposed never to have left their motherland (the USSR) before. An analysis of shifts in foreign migrations of Russians by Olga Vendina helps to answer the question whether they could organize themselves and create a diaspora of full value or remain an amorphous national minority.

Ethnic Russians make up 18 percent of the population of the "near abroad." Though the tendency for them to return to Russia could be observed already since the mid-1970s, these migrations grew sharply in 1992-1994. Under new conditions, repatriation became most often forced and resulted from ethnic discrimination. The types of national and ethnic self-identification among Russians vary depending on the localization, the "age" and the origin of their groups. In most of Ukraine and Transdnistria (a part of Moldova with a predominantly Russian-speaking population which proclaimed its independence in 1990), Russians' identity is complicated, ambiguous and "eroded"; in the Baltic countries, West Ukraine and most of Moldova their identity is marked by a certain inferiority complex; in Transcaucasia, Kazakhstan and Central Asia it is based on a high self-estimation.

The identity of Russians who resettled from Russia to the countries of "the far abroad" is not shaped yet. They feel by intuition the need for the restoration by Russia of the role of a great power, which could raise their status, the respect of local dwellers and diminish the necessity in the creation of a true

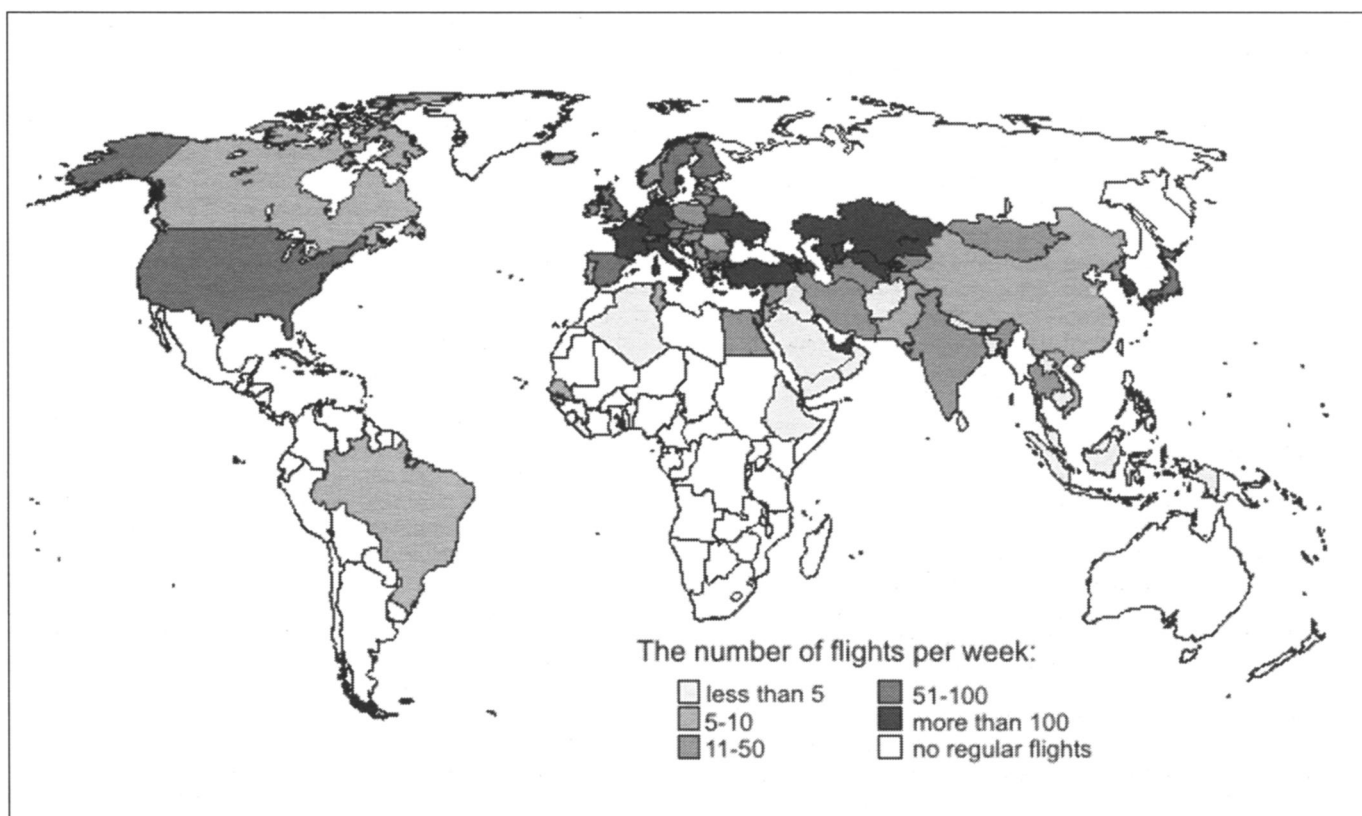


Fig. 1: The number of air flights per week to Russia and from Russia.

diaspora. An analysis of six waves of Russian emigration allows us to come to the conclusion that a high educational and intellectual level was the main feature of Russian communities abroad. It was typical of emigration during the first years after the 1917 revolution. The quality of "human capital" from Russia was as a rule supported by the contemporary brain drain.

The religious factor, according to Alexei Krindatch, becomes more relevant for the geopolitical situation of Russia. A particular place in the formation of the Russian political space belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which plays a very important role in the Orthodox world. The ROC remains a spiritual and institutional force still uniting Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Besides, in many states of the "near abroad" (especially in the Baltic countries and in Central Asia), parishes of the ROC assume the functions of a kind of ethnocultural center consolidating a considerable part of the Russian population. The ROC is an international social institution and acquires a more and more active role on the political scene in Russia and in other CIS countries as well as outside her borders.

Among former Soviet republics, only Russia is comparable with the Russian Empire and the USSR in confessional diversity. Almost all world religions (Christian denominations, Islam, Buddhism) either have vast historical areas of influence here, or are represented by numerous ethnoconfessional minorities, which are dispersed over all national territory (Judaism, the Roman Catholic Church, different Protestant Churches). The development of religious communities has a considerable influence on the relations of Russia with the outside world.

Islam is the second religion of Russia by number of believers. Today, the "Muslim factor" is always present both in domestic and foreign policy. It is difficult to estimate it exactly, because it is often supposed that all members of traditionally Muslim ethnic groups living in Russia are Muslim believers. Anyway, the ratio of "Muslim" groups in the total population of Russia is constantly growing. It is necessary to take into account huge ethnocultural and regional differences inside the Muslim community, which consists of 40 ethnic groups speaking various languages and having different cultures.

In the late 1980s, Russia took the way of religious revival. Despite the importance of its real consequences, a clear system of relations between the state and Churches has not yet been created. The position of the ROC in Russian politics is not strictly defined, as well as a possible role for religion in the formation of the new Russian national-political ideology.

There exists an inseparable connection between geopolitics, iconography and political identity. Jean Gottmann was the first who in the early 1950s considered the importance of iconography in the creation of national and political identity. National iconography is a result of a long historical development of the perception by state leaders, public opinion and the intellectual elite of the place of a country in the world, its geopolitical situation, national interests, and external threats to national security.

Literature, music, fine arts play a considerable role in the formation of social representations about territory as an element of iconography. Poetry and symphonic music are one of the most abstract and symbolic kinds of literature and arts. Using an analysis of works of major Russian (Soviet) poets and composers, it is possible to define the place of Russia on the geopolitical axis "East-West," to follow the evolution of self-identification of the country and of the relationship between the development of geopolitical concepts and iconography, to analyze the image of (Western) Europe in Russia and, vice versa, the perception of Russia in (Western) Europe. Such an attempt has been made by Vladimir Kolossov, Tamara Galkina

and Olga Lavrenova.

They analyzed maps, tables and diagrams reflecting the kind, the frequency and the character of toponyms mentioned in poetic and abstract musical works of different authors and epochs and, respectively, shifts in the evolution of social representations about the world and Russia herself. The authors linked the evolution of self-identification of the country in the mirror of poetry and academic music with its geopolitical development.

The Russian "toponymic" iconography is very rich and was widely used by the political and intellectual elites in state-building and in purposes of national integration. During the Soviet period, the creation of geographical (territorial) images followed general tendencies of aut centrism ("the USSR as the main center of the progressive world"), ideologization and submission of the arts to political and geopolitical interests of power, even in symphonic music.

There is no doubt that iconography, in its turn, influences the popularity of geopolitical concepts and representations ("the movement of ideas" in Jean Gottmann's term) and the strategic choice of the country.

The geopolitical vision of the world being shaped in the consciousness of Russian citizens under the influence of mass media is considered in the example of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta (NG)*, a liberal daily newspaper of high repute (KOLOSSOV, TIKUNOV and ZAYATS, 2000). The importance of an area was evaluated by the frequency of its mention in the newspaper's pages. A separate article appeared in this newspaper during almost three years (1997 to early 2000) having a more or less obvious geographical address or addresses which was taken as a unit for mapping and calculations. The study was limited to articles having a more or less clear political sub-text. The authors came to the conclusion that Russian public opinion perceives the world space and the territory of its own country in a discrete way. Mass media play an outstanding role in the shaping of geographical images, in presenting some countries and regions in a favorable light and often imposing negative images of other territories, often without "objective" justifications.

However, information about regions of Russia in *NG* correlated considerably with their share in population, the economic potential and the real influence on the political situation in the country. As for the outer world pictured by *NG*, the "near abroad" clearly dominated in information. Quite naturally, areas of ethno-political conflicts close to Russian borders are highlighted. Russia was represented first of all as a European power maintaining the closest relations with the club of leading world powers (figs. 2 and 3).

The character of Russian national (political) identity was analyzed by a sociologist, Lev Gudkov. It still is one of the most "ideologized" and mythical themes discussed by the intellectual elite in Russia. The first system of ideological constructions, which should be used as a basis of national identity, was created in the early 19th century, but for a long time there have not been serious attempts at its academic description and analysis, with the exception of works of outstanding historians before the 1917 revolution (Kluchevsky, Milukov and some others).

Before the collapse of the communist regime, there were practically no special theoretical or methodological works on this problem. The present-day structure of national identity was formed in the period of Brezhnev, though its major components had existed in the early 20th century, and some of them were reanimated by the Stalin regime.

The study is based on the data of a survey conducted by the All-Russian Centre of Public Opinion in 1988-1999 and includes an analysis of mythical elements and the structure of Russian national identity, of its territorial and temporal dimen-

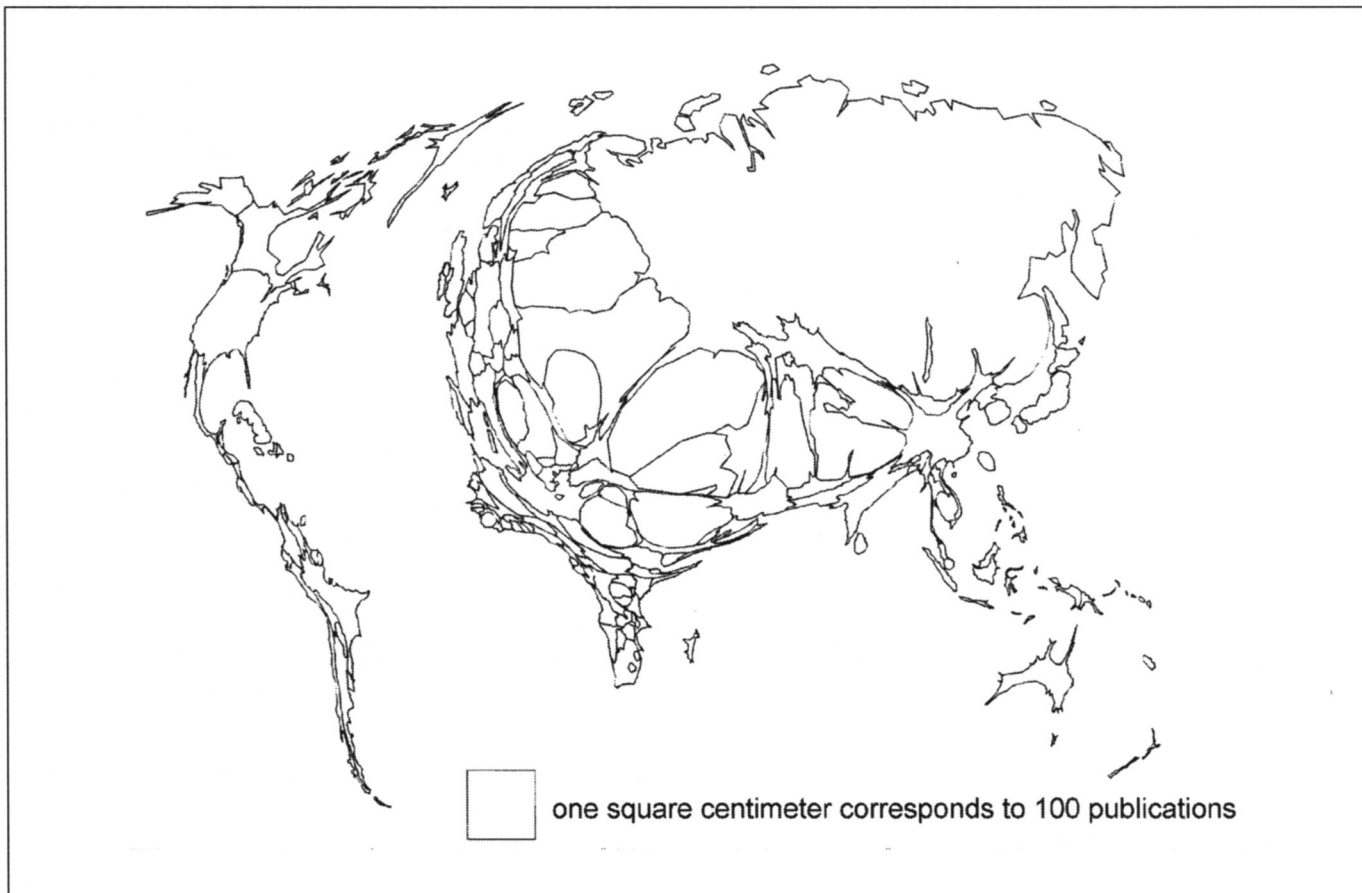


Fig. 2: The number of publications in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* by country.

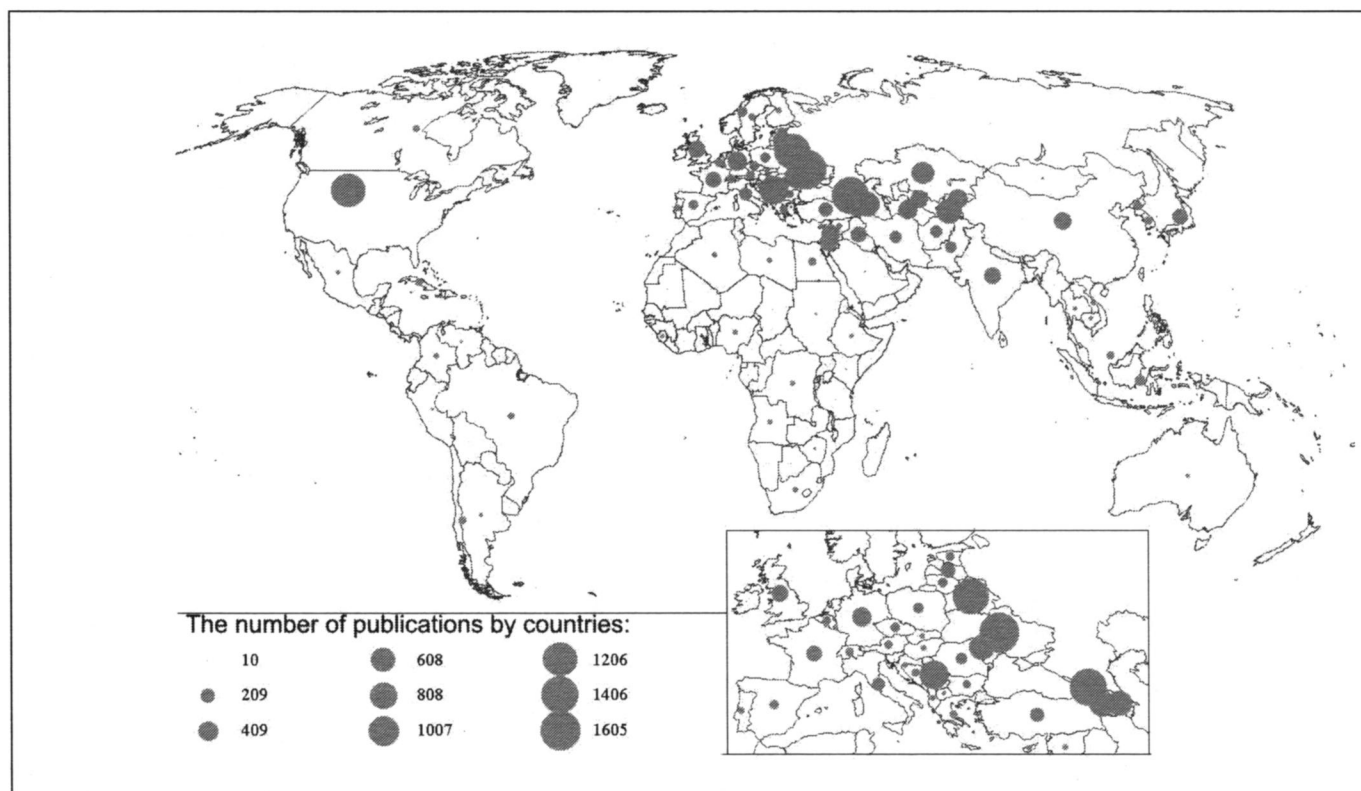


Fig. 3: The absolute number of publications in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* by country in 1997-2000.

sions, the role of the image of the "enemy" and of the attitude to other countries in its formation.

Nowadays, self-identification of Russians is controversial: on the one hand, it is to a large extent based on representations and values of the Soviet era (greatpowerness, heroic, mobilizing nationalism), and on the other hand, on amorphous and irrational views on a "normal," quiet and socially and legally secure life as a vague prototype of civil society.

The disintegration of the Soviet system provoked significant changes in identity. Direct relations of individuals with the state weakened, and the traditionalist complex of representations about historical events, outstanding leaders and other persons, and the symbolic role of territory strengthened. Such interrelated shifts show the shortage of values today, the lack of collective positive representations about reality, of social mechanisms of self-respect. In the late 1990s, the only positive point of national consciousness of post-Soviet society was the victory in the Great Patriotic War (War World II).

The attitude to the West remains ambiguous. It is still considered as a source of threat, and at the same time as a temptation, and an unreachable ideal of welfare.

Exploitation of symbolic resources of the past, and opposition of Russia and Russians to developed countries and non-Russians inside the country have led in recent years to outbursts of xenophobia. The image of the "enemy," of the ethnic "other" became more important. However, in today's Russia attempts at the reanimation of great-Russian nationalism do not have a mobilizing force, but are only a form of psychological compensation and defense.

Main conclusions

The combination of the results obtained by the author of this paper demonstrates that despite loud declarations of Eurasianists and adherents of the "third way" concepts, in the matter of fact the main interests of Russia are related to Europe. The real geopolitical situation of the country in the mirror of its external relations differs considerably from representations of most contemporary theoreticians, depicting it in different ways depending on their ideological views.

As a Norwegian expert wrote not without irony, in the 19th century the Russian state started to copy European models of "ancient regimes" just when Europe rejected them, and in the 20th century to reproduce the socialist model created in Europe, which Europe preferred not to realize (NEUMANN, 1995, pp. 1-2).

Russia is a part of the Christian world. Despite her relative ethnic heterogeneity, the European cultural code has always been basic for Russia, and her history, counting more than one thousand years, is inseparable from the European process. And today, as well as earlier, achievements of European science, culture and the arts dominate the mind of Russians (UTKIN, 1999).

The analysis of almost all variables selected by the authors shows that the importance of former Soviet republics and former socialist countries of Europe in the external relations of Russia was constantly decreasing. But, naturally, the relations of Russia with the neighboring countries, which for centuries were part of the same state with her, are determined not only by economy. There is an obvious contradiction between remaining human and cultural ties and weakening (or weakened) economic and political contacts.

Calculations by Vladimir Kolossov and Rostislav Turovsky (2001), including an analysis of the geographical distribution of foreign official visits to and from Russia/the USSR, showed that the European orientation, together with prioritarian relations with the CIS countries, had long ago objectively become the dominant direction in foreign contacts of Russia.

For Russia's nearest neighbors on the west, the same European orientation does not at all necessarily contradict enjoying equal rights, mutually profitable and even friendly relations with Russia. Russia's neighbors and Russia can "move to Europe" not only in parallel but also in coordinated ways.

However, a number of popular scenarios of the development of the geopolitical situation in Europe are based on the assumption that by no means will Russia struggle for restoration of her direct political and military control over former Soviet republics and Central European countries. This assumption, in its turn, is based on representations of traditional pre-World War II geopolitics and, in particular, on the view that national interests are dictated by the geopolitical situation of the country, and are natural and unchangeable.

In other words, the bipolar world of the time of the Cold War has been replaced by a hierarchical military-political structure with the center in Brussels and concentric "strategic" circles-envelopes around it. Such a development would put the new independent states of Central and Eastern Europe in face of a wrong alternative: either civilized Europe, or the backward Asian East.

The main objective of Russian foreign policy is the ensuring of favorable external conditions for solving internal economic and social problems and successful participation in the creation of the new fair geopolitical world order. The realization of this goal is related not only with the transition to a market economy, but also with objective processes of globalization, and with changes in the Russian national and ethnic identity, with the building of the Russian political nation. External relations and foreign policy are their result and at the same time their instrument. The population of Russia is not yet well adapted to new state boundaries not matching ethnic, linguistic and cultural limits. Hence, external relations in Russia are a more important element of self-identification of people than in old democracies. Representations about principles of relations with the closest neighbors and with other neighboring countries are being shaped in Russia as a result of the struggle between different opinions. What is most important for Russia is to avoid the risk of turning to be again in international isolation and to ensure the conditions for the social and economic revival of the country.

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