

EURASIA AND EURASIANISM IN THE CONTEXT OF AVİM'S 15th ANNIVERSARY

Eurasianism, as a socio-political movement, emerged as a considerate challenge to Eurocentric thought, particularly in the early 20th century. It represents a multifaceted intellectual quest that questions the conventional wisdom of geopolitical identities and offers an alternative perspective.

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As the Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM) celebrates its 15th year, it is an opportune moment to reflect on the concepts of Eurasia and Eurasianism, pivotal elements in our institution's ethos. This commemoration is a celebration of the past and a recommitment to the intellectual discourse shaping our understanding of these concepts.

Eurasia: A Geopolitical and Cultural Mosaic

Eurasia, a term bridging the continents of Europe and Asia, represents more than a geographic entity; it symbolizes a rich tapestry of cultures, political ideologies, and histories. At AVİM, we have consistently engaged with the complexity and diversity of this vast region, understanding its critical role in global affairs¹.

Eurasianism: An Intellectual Journey and Standing Up Against Eurocentrism and Colonialism

Eurasianism, as a socio-political movement, emerged as a considerate challenge to Eurocentric thought, particularly in the early 20th century². It represents a multifaceted intellectual quest that questions the conventional wisdom of geopolitical identities and offers an alternative perspective. A group of Russian intellectuals originally initiated this movement of thought. It has

developed around two main pillars. Its first pillar is that it takes an intellectual stance against Eurocentrism. It is possible to describe this stance as an intellectual revolt opposing haughty and oppressive Eurocentric dogma. The second main pillar is determining Russian identity and Russia's place in world politics, then opposing attempts to exclude it from Europe and creating a synthesis that prioritizes its connection with Asia while preserving its Europeanness. The most well-known of these pillars is the second pillar, which is accepted as the basis of this movement of thought. On the other hand, the first column became blurred over time, remained very pale compared to the political appeal of the second column, and was left to be forgotten as a philosophical thought exercise.

One of the most prominent figures in this intellectual pursuit is Nikolai Sergeevich Trubetzkoi, who critiques Eurocentric biases and posits a unique synthesis of European and Asian influences³. He is considered to be the intellectual founder of Eurasianism. It is worth noting that Trubetzkoi is a politically liberal scholar and philosopher of his time⁴. He belongs to an aristocratic family and is known to be anti-Bolshevik⁵. As noted above, Trubetzkoy and other early Russian Eurasianists can be said to challenge the cultural hegemony of the West and Western political history. One of the most remarkable works on this subject is the essay titled *Europe and Mankind*, penned by Trubetzkoi in 1920. Although



Eurasianism is not referred to by name, this essay is generally considered a proto-Eurasianist work.

In his essay, Trubetzkoi first dwells on chauvinism and cosmopolitanism. He asserts that Europeans hold a fairly large variety of positions regarding the question of nationalism, but they are all on a spectrum between two extremes: chauvinism on one side and cosmopolitanism on the other. According to Trubetzkoi, cosmopolitanism is the chauvinism of Romano-Germanic values, and Romano-Germanic nations consider themselves representatives of civilization. In this context, European cosmopolitanism is pan-Romano-Germanic chauvinism, which is founded on unconscious prejudice and the egocentric mentality that their group is superior. In his essay, Trubetzkoi explains in a critical manner that the Romani-Germans belittled the peoples who were outside their value judgments by calling them “barbarians” and that they saw themselves as militarily quite powerful, but that these despised “barbarians” destroyed the Romani-Germans many times. He stated that this understanding of superiority does not reflect reality. Trubetzkoi also criticizes the colonialism of the Romano-Germanic nations. Trubetzkoi argues that Europe used evolutionary sciences as a means of deceiving people and legitimizing, in the eyes of the Romani-Germans and their followers, imperialist colonial policies and vandalistic exploitation

by the “great powers” of Europe and America. He explains the bitter legacy of colonization as follows:

When Europeans encounter a non-Romano-Germanic nation, they bring their goods and guns. If the nation offered no resistance, the Europeans would conquer them, make them their colony, and Europeanize them by force. If the nation intends to resist, then in order to be able to fight the Europeans, they have to acquire cannons and all the improvements of European technology. But this requires, on the one hand, factories, and industrial plants, and on the other hand, the study of European applied sciences. But factories are inconceivable without the European socio-political way of life, and the applied sciences cannot exist without the ‘pure’ sciences. Thus, in order to fight against Europe, the nation in question has to adopt, step by step, all of modern Romano-Germanic civilization to Europeanise themselves voluntarily. So, in both cases, Europeanization seems inevitable.⁶

Nikolai Trubetzkoi argues that the concepts of progress and civilization in Europe are a mask that serves colonial and aggressive designs that despise others and serve their interests, that Romano-Germanic cultural

It should be underlined that Eurasianism is constantly developing and renewing itself as a very dynamic understanding and that there is not and cannot be a single Eurasianism. Equating a wide range of thought exercises on Eurasia with the Russian-specific neo-Eurasianism that emerged in Russia in the 1990s without scholarly inquiry and labeling them in this way is not an approach compatible with the rationale of scholarly studies and academic thought processes.

superiority is based on an egocentric mentality, and that this egocentrism is irrational and harmful. He states that destructive Europeanization can be prevented if Europeanized nations reject Romano-Germanic self-centeredness and maintain a healthy sense of national pride. The aspect that Trubetzkoy criticizes most about the groups he describes as Romano-Germanic is that they look down on groups other than themselves and present themselves as the most intelligent and talented. He expresses his harsh criticism on this issue as follows:

The Romano-Germans were always so naively confident that they were the only people who

could brand themselves as ‘humanity’, brand their culture as ‘human civilization’, and finally, brand their chauvinism as ‘cosmopolitanism’. With this terminology, they were able to obscure the ethno-specific meaning of these concepts. In doing so, these concepts were made palatable to members of other ethnic groups. When Romano-Germans give foreign nations the more universal products of their material culture (military and transport technology), they also smuggle in ideas that are presented as ‘universal,’ diligently covering up the ethno-specific nature of these ideas.⁷

It is possible to say that Trubetzkoi’s criticisms of Eurocentrism a century ago, although they had controversial aspects, were content, academically valuable, and quite brave criticisms. It would be a fair approach to accept that these criticisms are still valid to a considerable extent today, in terms of certain aspects.

One point arousing interest in Trubetzkoi’s evaluations of Russian identity is his views that Russian culture has ethnographic ties with the Turani people. Trubetzkoi explains his noteworthy and striking ideas on this subject as follows.

From an ethnographic point of view, the Russian people are not purely Slavic. The Russians, Ugro-Finns, and the Volga Turks comprise a cultural zone that has connection with both Slavs and the ‘the Turanian East,’ and it is difficult to say which of these is more important. The connection



between the Russians and the Turanians has not only an ethnographic but anthropological basis: Turkish blood mingles in Russian veins with that of Ugro-Finns. And the Russian national character is unquestionably linked in certain ways with the "Turanian East."⁸

It is possible to describe the Eurasianism that emerged in the 1920s as classical Eurasianism. It is wrong to describe Eurasianism as a monolithic, single structure, whether in the classical sense of the 1920s or in the form of neo-Eurasianism specific to Russia in the 1990s. It should be underlined that Eurasianism is constantly developing and renewing itself as a very dynamic understanding and that there is not and cannot be a single Eurasianism. Equating a wide range of thought exercises on Eurasia with the Russian-specific neo-Eurasianism that emerged in Russia in the 1990s without scholarly inquiry and labeling them in this way is not an approach compatible with the rationale of scholarly studies and academic thought processes. It should be underlined that these approaches, which remind the bigoted Eurocentric views, have a stereotypical nature.

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Endnotes

- 1 Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, "AVİM On The Road To The Fifteenth Anniversary Of Its Founding," *Center For Eurasian Studies Comentary Series* 2023, no. 3 (January 12, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4333890>.
- 2 Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun and Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, "Turkey's Interests And Constructive Eurasianism," *Center For Eurasian Studies Analysis Series* 2022, no. 22 (May 5, 2022): 4, <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/72c8d>.
- 3 Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun and Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, "A Constructive Approach: AVİM In A Polarized World," *Center For Eurasian Studies Comentary Series* 2021, no. 48 (May 26, 2021): 3.
- 4 Edwin Battistella, "Nikolai Trubetzkoy: Introduction," in *Linguistics* (Oxford Bibliographies, February 25, 2014), <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199772810/obo-9780199772810-0179.xml>.
- 5 Bruno Maçães, *The Dawn of Eurasia: On the Trail of the New World Order* (London: Yale University Press, 2018), 182. Bruno

Maçães explains Trubetzkoi's departure from Russia as follows: "Trubetzkoi the scion of an old aristocratic family had spent several summers studying Circassian tales and songs near Kislovodsk and heard of the Bolshevik revolution while receiving treatment at a spa there. Together with his wife and young daughter, he would spend the next three years moving between Tbilisi, Baku, and Rostov before being evacuated to Yalta and then, as the White armies started to lose ground, to Istanbul. He never returned to Russia, where his aristocratic name would have spelled certain death, taking up a prestigious teaching position in Vienna in 1922.

- 6 Nikolai Sergeevich Trubetzkoy, *Europe and Mankind*, trans. Alexandr (Sasha) Trubetskoy (Sofia, 1920), <https://sashamaps.net/docs/writings/europe-and-mankind/>.
- 7 Trubetzkoy.
- 8 Nikolaï Sergeevich. Trubetskoi, *The Legacy of Genghis Khan and Other Essays on Russia's Identity*. (Ann Arbor: Michigan: Slavic Publications, 1991), 96.