

Biopower and geopolitics as Russia's neighborhood strategies: reconnecting people or reaggregating lands?

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In this article, we address geopolitics and biopower as two different yet mutually correlative discursive strategies of sovereign power in Russia. We challenge the dominant realist approaches to Russia's neighborhood policy by introducing the concept of biopolitics as its key element, which makes analysis of political relations in the post-Soviet area more nuanced and variegated. More specifically, we address an important distinction between geopolitical control over territories and management of population as two of Russia's strategies in its "near abroad."

Keywords: biopolitics; geopolitics; Russia; neighborhood

Introduction

In this article,¹ we address geopolitics and biopower as two different yet mutually correlative discursive strategies of sovereign power in Russia. We challenge the dominant realist approaches to Russia's neighborhood policy by introducing the concept of biopolitics as its key element, which makes analysis of political relations in the post-Soviet area more nuanced and variegated. More specifically, we address an important distinction between geopolitical control over territories and management of population as two of Russia's strategies in its "near abroad." Geopolitics is an instrument of sovereign powers competing for ruling territories, while biopolitics is a set of power tools for administering populations. This distinction can in particular be exemplified by the discrepancy between Eurasianism (as a set of mainly *geopolitical* ideas focused on governing territories) and the Russian World (as an overwhelmingly *biopolitical* doctrine premised on protecting an imagined trans-territorial community of Russian speakers allegedly sharing a common macro-identity).

In our analysis, we demonstrate conceptual gaps between the two strategies, as well as areas of overlaps and mutual gravitation. Genealogically, both strategies unfolded beyond the domain of the state, but were politically appropriated by the latter. Many proponents of these strategies prefer not to identify themselves with the Kremlin; their relationship with the state supposes a certain distance that is always a matter of rearticulation and renegotiation. In Etienne Balibar's words, the state wishes "to constitute in the imaginary register the commonly appropriated 'substance' of this political identity" that should "superimpose itself upon the preceding ones" (Balibar 2002, 81). This identity might remain "abstract" and based on "symbolic fraternity" and other rituals of "imagined similarity, exhibiting

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the individuals' belonging to the community as a common, physical or spiritual, 'nature' or 'substance'" (Balibar 2002, 68).

Neither biopolitical nor geopolitical strategy is conceptually self-sufficient, and each tends to overlap with the other to create zones of bio-/geopolitical regulation and control. Due to a precarious balance between the two, the predominance of one over another or a combination of the two depends on multiple factors pertaining to political dynamics of identity construction. It is against this theoretical background that we discuss the implications of geopolitics – the biopolitics nexus for interpretations of the crisis of the concept of the European Union – in Russia's common neighborhood.

Methodologically, this research is based on critical discourse analysis that is instrumental in showing that reality can be differently interpreted and contextualized (Lipovici 2009, 202). More specifically, the following methodological landmarks are key to our approach. First, we treat geopolitics and biopolitics as two "public philosophies" (Jorgensen 2013, 6–7) that "produce objects, and especially subjects" (Banta 2012, 382). These two public philosophies constitute different modalities of Russia's international subjectivity, as well as construct identities of Russian-supported territories that gravitate toward, and seek to associate themselves with, Russia. Second, having singled out geopolitical and biopolitical discourses as constitutive for Russian neighborhood policies, we apply the concept of intertextuality to study the intricate interaction between the two. This means that we not only relate texts from different registers – biopolitical and geopolitical – to one another, but also adhere to "the uncertainty of identity and meaning arising from the radical relationality between subjects and objects" (Lundberg and Vaughan-Williams 2015, 10). Third, we look at how the two discourses, being inherently dispersed due to the variety of meanings they encompass, semantically stabilize themselves through including certain content to and excluding from their underlying narratives (Oliwniak 2011, 51). This is done through using referential/nomination strategy aimed at identifying in-groups and out-groups in each discourse; and a strategy of predication that assigns certain qualities to subjects. Fourth, we relate the two public philosophies to policy-making, and thus move "from the order of discourse" into the field of foreign policy practice (Banta 2012, 393). Geopolitical and biopolitical frameworks can "help us to better understand reason for action" (Jorgensen 2013, 10) and thus can be seen as policy strategies with practical implications.

Conceptualizing the geopolitics–biopolitics nexus in the Russian context

The discipline of Russian studies is replete with unfortunate attempts to limit the interpretation of the Kremlin's foreign policy exclusively to geopolitical arguments (Götz 2015, 3–10). Unlike these reductionist explanations, in this article we identify two public philosophies – geopolitics and biopolitics – that represent two different ways of constructing Russia's international subjectivity, basically through its neighborhood policy. Contemporary followers of the French political philosopher Michel Foucault claim that biopolitics is a new concept that is instrumental in "reconceptualization of the limits of sovereign power: not as fixed territorial borders at the outer-edge of the territorial state, but infused through bodies and diffused across society and everyday life" (Vaughan-Williams 2012, 9). Biopolitics with its "rationalities and technologies" (Rabinow and Rose 2006, 202) gives us a more nuanced account of power that is based not only on force projection, but to a large extent on taking care of the population.

The distinction between geopolitics and biopolitics "concerns the primary referent object" (Smith 2007, 84) – territorial states with sovereignty as their core in one case, or people with their physical bodies in the other (Singer and Weir 2006, 445). The biopolitical type of power requires a particularly nuanced contextualization. Its Western liberal model is

aimed at “improving, promoting and managing life” (Alt 2015, 2) and can be deployed within the ascendant critique of territoriality (Paasi 2012, 2309). In a practical sense, this implies that geography ceased to be the dominant prism for tackling international issues, which are seen as increasingly related to human beings and their everyday lives. This vision can be discerned, for instance, in a transformation of Georgia’s policy of reintegration with its two breakaway territories to a policy of reconciliation that implies reengagement with the Abkhazian and South Ossetian populations, and measures to improve their living conditions, including education, medical service, people’s mobility, etc.

By the same token, the two discourses are mutually constitutive: “there is no geopolitics that does not imply a correlate biopolitics, and no biopolitics without its corresponding geopolitics” (Dillon and Luis Lobo-Guerrero 2008, 276). Biopolitics can discursively redefine territoriality: for example, through the issue of passports, people can be used to establish control over territories. Thus, the construction of a population correlates with the construction of a territory (Artman 2013, 694). The same is true with regard to Ukraine, where the various geopolitical, and thus territorially bound, discourses on policies toward separatist regions (Crimea and Donbas) are increasingly permeated by biopolitical reasoning.

Therefore, one may claim that biopolitical and geopolitical discourses reinforce and sustain each other, and can be mutually conditioning (Singer and Weir 2006, 450). As Rosenow (2009, 512) has argued, “there is a bond created between sovereignty and biopolitics that is established through the presumed necessity of sovereign action on biopolitical grounds.” Biopolitics thus can be interpreted “as the politics of a state modeled on the figure of the sovereign, and of all forms of biopolitical authority as agents of that sovereign” that wittingly or unwittingly act as his agents (Rabinow and Rose 2006, 202). In particular, this approach can be found in Rajaram’s analysis:

territorial politics is biopolitics ... The pristine sovereign territoriality is contaminated at the very outset by the imprint of the other it would exclude ... The fundamental facet of territorial sovereignty is a suffocating conception of human being and its relations to others. (2004, 205)

Russia’s model of biopolitics seems to be close to this perspective, with the logic of “spiritual health” and family values as constitutive elements of constructing a pro-Putin majority domestically, and projecting these norms externally. The clearly articulated distinction between a “conservative”/“holy” Russia and a “liberally emancipatory”/“sinful Europe” can serve as a good example of the biopolitics of sovereign power in the sphere of international relations. Harsh critiques of multiculturalism, homophobic actions, and religious diplomacy are specific policy fields in which Russia constructs its subjectivity on the basis of differentiating itself from Europe. The latter is often portrayed in public discourses as a civilization in decline infected by a “virus” that needs treatment. In Russia, biopolitical concerns about physical protection are intertwined with the “biopolitical production of fear” as a precondition for articulating and stabilizing Russia’s international subjectivity. In the meantime, Russia’s biopolitical strategy implies a series of exceptional measures applied to residents of Russia-friendly countries. Examples are granting equal labor rights to Armenian citizens employed in Russia, exemption of eastern Ukrainians from the normal procedure of citizenship application, as well as distribution of Russian passports to residents in the breakaway territories of Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.

The public resurgence of both geopolitics and biopolitics can be understood, following the logic of Stefano Guzzini, against the backdrop of a “foreign policy identity crisis – that is, anxiety over a new, a newly questioned or newly acquired self-understanding or role in world affairs” (Guzzini 2012, 70). As products of the structural inability of post-modern subjects to produce consistent accounts of themselves, the two discourses lack

coherence. The case of Russia attests to this. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian elites thought that ideologies were largely discredited and thus redundant. This fueled critical attitudes, if not aversion, to any ideological constructs in policy elites whose strategies were shaped by a sort of post-political pragmatism. That is why the Kremlin was eager to ground the consolidation of its power over neighboring countries in something “natural,” “objective,” and “indisputable.” “Civilizational geopolitics” (that treats Russia as a country constitutive of its own spheres of influence or areas of responsibility) and biopolitics (a family-like reconnection of Russia with its “compatriots living abroad”) became the two cornerstones for seemingly non-ideological yet pervasive neighborhood strategies. Both are appealing for the Kremlin due to their ability to create an illusion of divesting the ruling elite of responsibility for taking a certain course of action. Thus, it was a combination of biopolitical and geopolitical arguments that Putin used to claim that “in Crimea we didn’t have a choice but to protect residents of this peninsula” (Gazeta.ru 2015b). This revealing statement attests to one of the momentous functions of the geo-/biopolitical fusion – one of “normalizing” Russian policies by means of moving them away from a sphere of contestable individual or group preferences to a, largely imaginary, space of unproblematic and *a priori* justifiable sphere of depoliticized “truths.” Arguably, biopolitics is experienced “as one of the most important sources of ‘inescapable facts’ ... and is often treated as a matter of necessity ... beyond perspective or interpretation” (Blencowe 2013, 20). Protection of lives in this type of discourse is referred to as a matter of objectivity and “auto-normativity” in the sense that it can serve as a “locus of judgment, an immanent external, impartial, objective position” (Blencowe 2013, 21). References to saving the lives of human beings also connote the idea of survival of the nation as one of “biopolitical embodiments,” which opens broad prospects for biopolitical securitization, of which Russia’s policy toward Ukraine can serve as a perfect example. In the meantime, the Kremlin’s self-denial of the political basis of its *modus operandi* constitutes a major setback for Putin’s Ukraine discourse that proves to be grounded in an intuitive estrangement from the very nature of choices he makes, rather than in a Schmittian logic of sovereign decisionism at its core.

Therefore, the multiplicity of discourses under certain circumstances can not only diversify the Russian foreign policy toolkit, but also play a, perhaps temporarily, stabilizing role in promoting Russia’s neighborhood agenda. Arguably,

at the root of sovereign authority is the sovereign’s ability to straddle natural and juridical orders. Sovereignty’s power of the ban amounts to a paradoxical ability to expose and endanger living beings across a nature/law threshold in which law passes over into violence and violence into law. (Coleman and Grove 2009, 496)

This mixture of biopolitical and geopolitical reasoning, with their obvious imperial connotations, accentuates two facets of the idea of post-Soviet unity as the basis for Moscow’s reintegration plans. With all the differences between the two concepts, both are premised on the idea of incompleteness of the Russian Federation and its incongruence to the – largely mythical yet widely shared – idea of a “genuine Russia,” which supposedly can be extended beyond the current state borders. The two concepts may overlap, as epitomized by the annexation of Crimea and Russia’s de-facto insistence on spheres of influence in Europe under the guise of the “Russian World” doctrine, a specific type of biopolitical discourse that we are going to compare with more geopolitical worldviews and narratives, including Eurasianism.

Biopolitical investments and the genealogy of the Russian World

Biopolitical practices of “administration, orchestration, production and reproduction of populations and life” (Selby 2007, 333) gradually gained prominence in Russian studies

and in research on other post-Soviet states. Biopolitical discourse, even if it comes under different, less academic names, offers its own language of post-Soviet integration, and serves as a trans-ideological platform aimed at reconnecting Russian-speaking communities – intentionally broadly defined – with Russia, but also biopolitically constituting Russian identity. The key biopolitical metaphor widely used in the Kremlin’s rhetoric is one of the family, with its Soviet and imperial connotations. From this perspective, one may reconceptualize the disintegration of the Soviet Union not as a “geopolitical catastrophe” as Putin dubbed it, but rather as a “biopolitical catastrophe,” with Russians turned into a divided people (Kashin 2015).

By the same token, biopolitics is not always and necessarily state-centric, and contains strong societal underpinnings and non-governmental elements. The concept of the “Russian World” (*Russkii mir*) in its different versions is a good example of this. Initially, the idea was discussed outside the state apparatus, and was marginal to the predominantly technocratic ruling elite throughout the 1990s. The state started taking the “Russian World” narrative seriously only in 2007 with the establishment of an eponymous foundation, which initially was an organic part of a predominantly technological approach to policy-making. Viacheslav Nikonov, the head of the “*Russkii Mir*” foundation, claimed that there was no ideology behind it, and the whole project was inherently trans-ethnic and thus inclusive: he said that Ukrainians, Belorussians, or Jews could be part of the “Russian World” if they choose to identify themselves with Russian cultural traditions and the “Russian psyche” (Nikonov 2015a). Nikonov underpinned the biopolitical core of this concept having argued that “we need to reassemble people, not lands. And globally, not domestically, since inside Russia these connotations can sound nationalistic” (Nikonov 2011). Underlying the “objective” and allegedly politically neutral character of the Russian World idea, he asserted that “it is about justice and truth, not nationality” (Smetanina 2014). However, as we shall see, the initial inclusiveness of the concept failed to materialize in practice, being suppressed by a more exclusionary reading of the Russian World as a homogenous community of Kremlin loyalists, cleansed of political dissent and isolated from – rather than connected to – a global world of cultural exchanges and cross-border flows.

Two facets of the Russian World

Beyond the state – though in close proximity to its premises – the Russian World ideas were promoted from two dissimilar perspectives: the technocratic (Petr Shchedrovitskii, Sergei Chernyshov, Sergei Gradirovskii) and the religious (the Russian Orthodox Church, ROC).

The *technocratic version* connoted liberal ideas of cosmopolitanism and the world-systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein. The Russian World was seen as a “global mega-project” reattaching the diaspora to Russia all across the globe, and thus as part of a new globalized world of trans-border mobility, instant communication, and ubiquitous networking (Khromchenko 2002). The technocrats argued that the global crisis of the state leads to the redefinition of identities in non-political, including civilizational, terms. Thus, the Russian World was seen as a post-national and territorially dispersed form of governance, and a precondition for communicating with other civilizational clusters (“worlds”).

But despite a certain degree of liberalism, the technocrats did not believe in the smooth inclusion of Russia in world civilization, because they saw the external environment as highly competitive and unfriendly. In their view, the strongest global actors would never accept Russia as an equal partner, which invigorated a binary type of thinking: “they would make *us* extensions of their own selves.” The Russian World technocrats believed that Russians were deprived of their “authentic” identity during Soviet times and after

the fall of the USSR, which made them share the concept of a traumatic historical experience as key to understanding Russia's collective self. The technocrats of the 1990s, instead of building a modern nation state, advocated for a policy of a return to something authentic and "real," a "Russian alternative" (evidently, to the West).

However, the technocratic reading of the Russian World did not imply territorial expansion; it was rather seen as akin to the idea of "cultural imperialism." Wars of the future were to be anticipated not over territories, but over communication between large agglomerations of people, and the key to success ought to be investments in human capital. This is what made the Russian World a sort of humanitarian technology, and an element of soft power aimed at producing attractive "images of the future."

The *religious* vision of the Russian World emanated from the ROC. It claimed that the boundaries of the Russian World coincide with canonic boundaries of the Church itself. Geographically, it embraces Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, and only under certain circumstances Moldova and Kazakhstan, but not Georgia, Bulgaria, Romania, or Greece. The religious conceptualization, like the technocratic one, assumes that in civilizational terms the "real Russia" is more than the current Russian Federation as a state.

The ROC claimed that the Russian World is not only about language – it is about values, as opposed to politically divisive matters (Patriarchia.ru 2014d). Unlike the lay versions of the Russian World, the religious discourse insists that Orthodoxy is the key foundation for the whole concept, which leads to the denial of its poly-confessional background (Evfimii 2009). The ROC is also critical of the characterization of the Russian World as a trans-ethnic community: Russians are considered as a "super-ethnos" that comprises many other ethnic groups both inside and outside the country. This explains why the Russian World is critically perceived by the Russian Muslim community: the first deputy head of the Spiritual Board of Russia's Muslims dubbed the Russian World a proto-ideology, questionable on constitutional grounds and disrespectful to the Muslim population of the country (Lenta.ru 2015).

Religious connotations were strong in the narrative of the Izborskii Club, a platform for a patchwork of advocates of imperial vision of the Russian World, though they would prefer to call themselves nationalists or patriots. Yet their ideology – shared by many in the Kremlin – has much more to do with religious mysticism than with advocacy of a strong and efficient nation state. The Club members concurred that Russian identity cannot be deduced from other identities, and needs no external justifications (Doktrina 2015). Belonging to the Russian World is a matter of belief, not rational pragmatic calculations. The Russia doctrine of the Izborskii Club in some respects distances from the state that which was portrayed as too "mechanical" (i.e. administrative, technocratic, and apolitical) and thus is insufficient for the reification of the Russian World imagery.

Hijacking the concept: the Russian World as a Kremlin policy tool

It is this menu of two different interpretations – technocratic and religious – that the Russian state has at its disposal for synthesizing and politically operationalizing the Russian World concept for the sake of (re)creating the nodal points of Russia's collective identity. The state was eager to synthesize the non-/trans-ideological approach of the technocrats with theological adherence to the fundamental values of love of the motherland and belonging to a single political body as key driving forces for the Russian World doctrine. The novelist Zakhar Prilepin formulated this spirit of solidarity with broadly defined fellow countrymen as follows:

There is no ideology nowadays; it is instincts that are ideological ... The soil, the honor, the victory, the justice – neither of those fundamentals needs an ideology. Love necessitates no

ideology ... There is only a sense of kinship, that's it. The comprehension of what is going on in Russia is based on neither a certain volume of knowledge nor on intellectual casuistry that can be used to deconstruct everything, but on the feeling of cognation. It grows in human beings from the childhood, and it is impossible to get rid of it ... All the genuine denies the very idea of choice. (Prilepin 2013)

In this sense, biopolitical arguments can be viewed as cornerstones for Russian identity-making and, thus, defining the boundaries of "Russianness." Seen from the perspective of Russia's neighborhood policy, this might be interpreted as "the biopolitical border increasingly replacing the older, geopolitical border" (Kelly 2010, 6). As key elements of its neighborhood neoimperialism, Russia applies biopolitically inclusive strategies. It extends its sphere of "biopolitical care" (Kelly 2010, 10) to pensioners and WWII veterans who live beyond the country; migrants from Armenia who got equal labor rights in Russia after this country joined the Eurasian Economic Union; students from eastern Ukraine who are admitted to Russian universities on equal footing with Russian citizens, and residents of Transnistria for whom the Russian government has simplified the procedure of obtaining Russian passports in the aftermath of the deterioration of Russian–Ukrainian relations in 2015 (Blencowe 2013). Putin's appeals to Lithuanians to voluntarily "move to Russia" due to the allegedly shrinking Lithuanian population after the fall of the Soviet Union (RBC 2015) can be seen as a biopolitical utterance as well. Often biopolitical inclusion produces geopolitical effects: policies of "biopolitical care" are conducive to the incorporation of some breakaway territories into Russia, as evidenced by the annexed Crimea, the creeping incorporation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Russia, and Moscow's support for eastern Ukraine.

By the same token, biopolitical borders can shape dynamics of exclusion from the sphere of the Russian World. Arguably, the latter "is not about preserving a zone of influence or imperial expansion, but rather about drawing boundary of the nation – not administratively, but mentally, which envisions cutting off all others" (Lukianov 2015). That is why biopolitical strategy contains strong exclusionary elements. Domestically, the rules of inclusion to and exclusion from the Russian World are defined along the lines of loyalty to the ruling regime. Self-appointed speakers for the Russian World – such as a local legislator from St. Petersburg Vitalii Milonov – might assume that, for example, the head of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov is "more Russian" than the liberal TV journalist Ksenia Sobchak (Gazeta.ru 2015a). The Kremlin, as its opponents deem, ultimately converted the Russian World into an ideological linchpin of the authoritarian regime, functionally playing a role similar to Hitler's ideology or Communism (Piontkovsky 2015). This betrays a great deal of hypocrisy embedded in the rhetoric of "protecting compatriots living abroad," since it does not apply to the multiple critics of the Putin regime that had to leave the country for the sake of their personal security. Thus, the name of the former world chess champion Garry Kasparov (who migrated from Russia after having lambasted the regime for dictatorial rule) was removed from the history of Russian sports achievements (Znak 2015). In a similar vein, some federal politicians requested that Maria Gaidar, who was appointed a deputy of the former Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili in the government of Odesa in Ukraine, ought to be deprived of Russian citizenship and even accused of state treason (Repliuia 2015).

From the Russian neighborhood policy perspective, the strong exclusionary components of the "biopolitical investment" (Merlingen 2006, 193) in the Russian World concept render equally controversial effects. The resolution of the World Russian People's Assembly held in Kaliningrad lambasted attempts to discuss the issues of a peculiar "Russian-German identity" in this enclave as potentially conducive to alienation

of its population from the Russian cultural tradition (Patriarchia.ru 2015). This example shows that there might be geopolitical considerations standing behind biopolitics, which are even more visible in the case of Crimea.

Geopolitics and spheres of influence

Russian geopolitical thinking in many respects differs from European schools of thought that after the end of the Cold War shifted toward a constructivist and post-structuralist understanding of geographical factors as being shaped mainly by cultural discourses and representations (Guzzini 2012). In Russia, geopolitics basically refers to “the politics of balance of power and spheres of influence” (Morozova 2009, 672), which is exemplified by (but not limited to) Eurasianism, a “public philosophy” that has its sympathizers in EU member states, such as Hungary (Ágh 2010).

Most Western geopolitical narratives share at least four important tenets. First, they are explicitly anti-neoliberal, which makes them particularly popular in the conservative (Mezhuev 2015) as well as left-wing (Kolesnikov 2015) flanks of the political spectrum. Their second common denominator is the idea of plasticity of Russian borders: as Vadim Tsymburskii claimed, historically Russia could incorporate some lands and then give them up; consequently, borders were movable frontiers rather than relatively stable instruments for delineating the outside from the inside (Tsymburskii 1993). Third, geopolitical thinkers usually claim that Russia’s identification with Europe might come with a high price of submission to it. Fourth, many would argue that the only alternative to a spheres-of-influence type of policy (whether it comes under the guise of great power management or establishing coordinated rules of the game) in the whole Baltic-Black Sea area is military confrontation (Fenenko 2014).

Geopolitical approaches in Russia come in two versions. One is explicitly normative and ideological. It can be associated with Aleksandr Dugin’s version of Eurasianism, which in his interpretation is an anti-universalist doctrine aimed at deconstructing Western hegemony. It contains some post-colonial elements (Russia is portrayed as subordinate to the imperial policies of Euro-Atlantic forces), and in some respects is close to the leftist critique of the West as a civilization allegedly grounded in racist attitudes to outsiders. However, Dugin’s geopolitics is not state-centric: his major reference points are civilizations, not nation-states.

Similarly, some voices within the Orthodox community praise the Kremlin-led Eurasian project from a normatively fundamentalist perspective, as a means to prevent the West from destroying itself from the inside due to the ubiquitous liberal permissiveness and cultural tolerance toward non-European identities. By fostering the Eurasian Union, Russia is believed to salvage the whole Christian West from moral decay and a geopolitical limbo (Tishinskii 2015).

A different vision of geopolitical Eurasianism is grounded in pragmatic reasoning. For example, Sergei Glaziev, presidential adviser on regional integration, puts sovereignty at the center of his narrative, and claims that the capital difference between the EU and the Eurasian Union is that the former deprives neighboring countries of their sovereignty, while the latter, on the contrary, protects their sovereign qualities. The EU is thus portrayed as a colonial/imperial power, a politicizing actor that functions beyond economic rationality, while Russia leaves politics and ideology aside for the sake of alleged pragmatism and rationality. In Glaziev’s interpretation, Eurasianism is a counter-hegemonic geoeconomic strategy with the potential to form a wider bloc of countries to challenge the predominance of Euro-Atlantic institutions, and geopolitically counter-attack by means of

enticing Greece, Cyprus, Hungary, and potentially other countries to break out of the EU orbit (Glaziev 2013).

The crisis in Russia–Ukraine relations: geopolitics-cum-biopolitics

There are many voices who offer an overwhelmingly geopolitical interpretation of Russia's stance toward Ukraine (Laruelle 2015), as well as the overall situation in this country, especially its eastern regions.

There exists a temporary line of demarcation between Ukraine and the Moscow-backed insurgents. It's time to stop bemoaning that "our people live there" and speak about humanism and help. We need to cut this territory off for the time being. The border is sacrosanct and will remain so,

asserts Ukraine's first President Kuchma (2015). In our view, approaches of this kind overlook important biopolitical ingredients in the Ukraine conflict, resulting from the existence of the large Russian-loyal population in Crimea and Donbas (Clem 2015, 230). The most interesting feature is the different modalities of functioning of biopolitical discourses, as public philosophies as well as policy strategies.

Those sharing biopolitical departures would agree that the population of conflict zones is defined in such categories as abandonment, displacement, and deprivation. The cultural anthropologist Uehling (2015) drew a broad picture of a biopolitical catastrophe in annexed Crimea, claiming that it is a matter of physical life – birth, death, or acquisition of passports – that are key concerns for residents of this peninsula:

According to Ukrainian law, neither birth nor death certificates issued in territory controlled by Russia are recognized This means a baby born in occupied territory, legally at least, doesn't exist as an official citizen of Ukraine. This complicates getting medical care, enrolling the child in daycare, and receiving the benefits accorded to other families.

Besides, internally displaced people from Crimea, whether Russian, Ukrainian, or indigenous Crimean Tatar, find themselves in a legal limbo because of both Russian and Ukrainian state policies. This is in line with a conclusion invoked earlier by other researchers: "We have seen the rise of new kinds of patients' groups and individuals, who increasingly define their citizenship in terms of their rights (and obligations) to life, health and cure" (Rabinow and Rose 2006).

In Ukrainian discourses, the biopolitical reasoning translates into the refocusing of the country's long-term strategy of meeting everyday needs of people living in frontline borderlands, as opposed to thinking in terms of retrieving territories:

The government speaks about reintegration of territories, instead of thinking about reassembling communities, social groups, citizens. This is a crucial point. We tend to deem that this war is over territories, not human being[s], and therefore rely basically on military instruments. But we need a dialogue with refugees and other groups that might be agents of changes in the future. (Minakov 2015)

Concomitantly, the issues of identity, including relations with central authorities, are discussed through the lens of supplying food and paying salaries (Ferris-Rotman 2015). Therefore, biopolitical regulation is by no means a purely theoretical concept; it is a matter of everyday policies. The head of the Donetsk administration formulates the governance agenda in biopolitical categories: "Parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions are nowadays sick, and this is exactly why we shouldn't cut them off" (Glava Donetskoi . . . 2015). In more theoretical terms, this statement can be interpreted as a call for biopolitical normalization of breakaway territories through developing a strategy of engaging with people living

on the other side of the new borderlines. This biopolitical logic, also noticeable in Georgian discourses on Abkhazia and South Ossetia, not only challenges traditional nation-states focusing on geopolitical and hard-power based considerations, but also opens up new prospects for thinking about post-Soviet conflicts in terms of human – and thus “soft” – security, rather than state-centered territoriality. In this framework, the whole spectrum of issues related to war-torn societies, including jobs, education, medical services, and resettlement of refugees and internally displaced persons, forms a biopolitical agenda of sustainable peace-building that might be an appealing alternative to war brinkmanship.

Yet from the other side of the frontline the situation looks the opposite. Discursive construction of Russia as a protecting power and of this population as an object of this protection constitutes the core of biopolitical strategies practiced by the Kremlin. In the view of pro-Russian separatists, problems appeared

when Ukraine abandoned its citizens. Russia even during the wars in Chechnya continued to pay pensions, but Kyiv applies the burned land tactics towards Donetsk and Luhansk. Children can't get birth certificates, people can't get social subsidies, etc. Help from Russia is very much welcome here. (Kirillov, Dergachev, and Maetnaya 2015)

This type of discourse is essential for the Russian World concept. The Donetsk People's Republic “Constitution” directly refers to the exceptional role of the ROC and the “Russian World,” which confirms that a key function of the latter is to expand the boundaries of the Russia-controlled political space (Teslia 2015). As one of the leaders of separatists in eastern Ukraine Aleksandr Zakharchenko asserts, “the struggle is between the vivid and healthy Russian World, and the moribund European world of consumption” (Chotakoe ... 2015). The Russian World, discursively functioning as a post-imperial chronotope, is set to signify alien spaces in categories of Russia's own semiosphere “and thus disavow the whole problematique of state borders” (Kalinin 2015).

It is at this point that discourses of biopower and geopolitics overlap, and biopolitics evolves into land grabs. A good illustration of this is what Laruelle dubbed “Russification” of the Eurasian doctrine as an intertextual meeting point of biopolitical and geopolitical discourses that merge in a concept of “large Russia” propagated, in particular, by Aleksandr Dugin (Laruelle 2015, 6). The ensuing nexus biopolitics–race–war serves as a good platform for this merger, with security being defined in biopolitical terms of discursively producing feelings of fear and danger (Debrix and Barder 2012, 59–60), as epitomized by the pretentious Kremlin's rhetoric of “a new struggle against fascism” in Ukraine.

The transformation of biopolitics as humanitarian care about a population into territorial geopolitics through the appropriation of territories is conditioned by two factors. First, it is rooted in the multiple negative – and most likely underestimated by the Kremlin – effects of interfering in Ukraine under Russian World slogans, which turned most Ukrainians away from the Kremlin, even in regions with strong Russian cultural and linguistic influence (Coynash 2015). Therefore, what was represented in the Kremlin's apologetic discourse as a civilizational and normative collision between Russia and the West turned into a conflict between divergent parts of the Russian World, with the war in Ukraine at its zenith (Govorun 2014).

Second, in the official discourse, the biopolitical core of the Russian World has undergone radical transmutations due to its interpretation by the Kremlin as a matter of “political choice” between staying in or outside of it. As a political commentator claimed, “Rosenbaum,² Kobzon,³ and Shoigu,⁴ are parts of the Russian World, while Makarevich,⁵ Sobchak,⁶ and Nemtsov,⁷ are not” (Ischenko 2014). The projection of this logic of political distinction into Ukraine triggered Russia's information war against the government in Kyiv

as allegedly being under the sway of neo-Nazis, and eventually inevitably refocused attention from taking care of people to the legitimization of mass killing within territories that the adherents of the Russian World considered as rightfully belonging to them.

The war in Ukraine thus became a point of crystallizing a new system of political coordinates, which was summarized by the first vice prime minister Dmitry Rogozin's claim that "civil war informs citizens with a civil standpoint" (Rogozin 2014). Yet what started as trans-border care about compatriots ultimately produced "a whole class of people ... whose lives do not count as life" (Murray 2014), including mercenaries, volunteers, etc. "The seemingly contradictory potential to be both stewards of life *and* administrators of death, or ... the 'killing-healing' paradox" (Enoch 2004) is what might characterize the biopolitical dimension of Russia's Ukraine policy. In the meantime, Carl Schmitt's metaphor of the brother who "reveals himself as my enemy" (Ungureanu 2008, 311), being applicable to Russia's mainstream vision of Ukraine, creates fertile ground for "geo-biopolitics" (Minca 2007, 764) with all its deadly repercussions for European security.

This can explain the devolution of Nikonov's discourse from his assurances that "Ukraine has been formed as an independent nation" (Nikonov 2015b) to his urging the recognition of the "independence" of the east Ukrainian provinces (Memorial 2014), which is not – at least, for the time being – part of official Kremlin policy. Other Nikonov pronouncements – in particular, about the Euromaidan revolution as a declaration of war on Russia and about the government in Kyiv as "assassins of its own people" (Nikonov 2014) – clearly demonstrate how the Russian World concept was transmuted into a militant policy tool.

Interestingly, the eruption of the crisis in Ukraine led many proponents of geopolitical approaches to oppose the regime. For example, the director of the Institute for Globalization Studies Mikhail Deliagin spoke about the "obvious failure of Russian policy toward Ukraine," which was manifested, in his view, by the de facto support of the "Nazi regime of Poroshenko" (Deliagin 2015a). For him, the crisis in Ukraine confirmed the US strategy of dividing Europe (in particular, splitting Germany and Russia), and the inability of Eastern Europe to economically develop without Russia (Deliagin 2015b).

A more prominent geopolitical figure, the leading voice in Eurasianism Aleksandr Dugin, took a milder, but still ambiguous position toward Moscow's policy in the Ukraine crisis. He praised Putin for the annexation of Crimea but criticized him for hesitancy over military intervention in eastern Ukraine. He argues that Putin faces the challenge of transforming Russia from a "state – corporation" (preoccupied with economic considerations) to a full-fledged civilization, completely independent from the West. He openly acknowledges that to achieve this transition Russia has to be ready for a real war (Dugin 2014). These voices substantiate the opinion of those commentators who deem that whether the Russian state remains the key producer of security discourses remains debatable (Pastukhov 2014).

Yet the religious discourse, being supportive, by and large, of the Kremlin policy, moved in the opposite direction, with a trend toward de-politicization at its core. The ROC views the crisis in Ukraine as "incomprehensible," and it necessitates "only prayers." The symbolic absence of the Patriarch at the ceremony of incorporating Crimea into the Russian Federation can be interpreted as a clear sign of his disappointment with the way the Russian World was instrumentally utilized by the Putin regime (Desnitskii 2014). The ROC representatives made clear that the Church does not take sides, and its representatives were at both conflicting sides (Patriarchia.ru 2014a). "The Church should not be expected to have a political stance," Metropolitan Ilarion said, claiming that the ROC is not supposed to react to the never-ending volatility of political borders

(Patriarchia.ru 2014b). It is this neutral position that allows the ROC to claim its potential role as an equidistant peacemaker (Patriarchia.ru 2014d). In his message to President Petro Poroshenko, Patriarch Kirill characterized Ukraine as an “inheritor and protector of the testaments of the great prince Vladimir who baptized Russia ... During my visits to Ukraine I have seen everywhere the best of the Christian tradition” (Patriarchia.ru 2014c). Thus, in this narrative Ukraine is not a country whose deviation from the “Russian World” is a challenge to Moscow, but the most authentic incarnation of the Orthodox traditions.

The ROC recognized that the bloodshed was a “big mistake,” and that Russia is supposed to “respect sovereignties of our Slavic brothers,” while they are expected not to challenge the unity of the Russian World. In the meantime, while speaking about the conflict in Ukraine, the Patriarch immediately referred to the necessity of preserving the unity of Russia itself (Patriarchia.ru 2014e) – a very clear signal of his disapproval of territorial expansion.

Of course, the ROC did not stay away from political statements altogether. Thus, it sees the origins of the conflict in the political activity of the Greek Catholic community, mainly from western Ukraine. In the ROC interpretation, they were instrumental in instigating the inter-ethnic clashes, which reached its zenith in the Euromaidan revolt. Ukrainian Greek Catholics are portrayed in ROC discourse as former collaborators with fascist Germany (Patriarchia.ru 2014b), which bears direct resemblance to the Kremlin discourse. The same goes for logically linking the Euromaidan with developments in the Middle East, in one chain of events allegedly aimed at creating instability at Russia’s borders (Patriarchia.ru 2014b). Yet by the same token the ROC is hesitant to characterize this as a political move, and explained it as a result of arrogance on the part of Greek Catholics (Patriarchia.ru 2014f).

Conclusions

As we ventured to show, distinctions between geopolitics and biopower boil down to differences between physical control over territories and management of the population. There are three main conclusions that stem from this analysis.

First, the merger of biopolitical and geopolitical strategies, epitomized by the annexation of Crimea, became possible on the basis of the overarching concept of sovereignty that extends beyond legal definitions and necessitates both geopolitical and biopolitical substantiation. Structurally, Russian neighborhood policies incorporate both above-mentioned elements as its core factors, which widens Russia’s hegemonic ambitions by means of combining traditional geopolitical strategies with biopolitical investments as different as language support programs, educational projects, passportization, and religious activities. Russia’s biopolitical instruments can be both inclusive (in a sense of incorporating in the Russian World orbit citizens of other countries) and exclusive (since the Russian-patronized biopolitical space, in the current context of EU–Russia confrontation, needs to be purified and protected against malign influences coming from Western liberalism). Yet it is biopolitical considerations (such as Russia’s support for the military insurgency in Ukraine on behalf of the “Russian World”) that might ruin the implementation of the geopolitical Eurasian project due to the negative counter-reaction from the part of major Russian allies who do not see themselves as objects of Russian biopolitics.

Second, the combination of geopolitical and biopolitical instruments redefines borderlands and boundaries in the post-Soviet area, with biopolitical bordering gaining more importance. This is evidenced by the biopolitical othering of the West by means of Russia’s self-detachment from liberal practices of human rights and tolerance. Europe,

the constitutive outside of Russia's sovereign *nomos*, is constructed in Russian discourse both normatively and geopolitically. This boundary-making goes hand in hand with de-bordering policies toward Russian-speaking communities residing in adjacent countries. Therefore, by relying on geopolitical and biopolitical instruments of hegemony, Russia aims at having an upper hand in defining the relations of inclusion and exclusion, which are key to redrawing identities and allegiances across all post-Soviet areas. It is exclusionary elements of the "Russian World" concept that might cause controversial effects for Moscow's policy in the post-Soviet area, by marginalizing regions (Central Asia and the South Caucasus) where the ethnically Russian population is minuscule and cannot constitute a viable political resource for imperial impositions.

Third, it is through the biopolitical and geopolitical lenses that the intricacies of Russia's international subjectivity can be spotted. As we have shown in our analysis, the Russian state appropriated a number of biopolitical and geopolitical discourses, but many of their producers prefer not to identify themselves with the Putin regime, thus leaving some leeway for keeping a critical distance from the Kremlin. This leaves the question of Russia's subjectivity largely undetermined – in various discourses it can be articulated in terms of culture (a home to all Russians), religion ("holy Russia"), civilization (Eurasianism), or empire (a new edition of the Soviet Union with its spheres of influence). What is missed in this discursive repertoire is a narrative of Russia as a nation state within its internationally recognized borders and civic patriotism based on commitment to effective governmental institutions. This omission betrays an explicitly expansionist logic of the Putin regime, largely sustained by a combination of biopower and geopolitics.

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Notes

1. The article is partly based on Andrey Makarychev's policy memo presented at PONARS-Eurasia workshop held at the Nazarbaev University, Astana, in June 2015.
2. A Russian guitar singer of Jewish origin.
3. A Soviet-Jewish singer of patriotic songs and a member of the Russian State Duma from the ruling United Russia party.
4. The Russian Defense Minister of Tuvan origin.
5. A popular pop singer known for his contestation of Putin's policy toward Ukraine.
6. A liberal Russian journalist.
7. An opposition leader who was killed in February 2015 close to the Kremlin.

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