Chapter 13

‘Eurasia’, ideology and the political imagination in provincial Russia

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Introduction

It is well known that over the 1990s the eighty-nine subject territories of the Russian Federation became increasingly independent from Moscow, but anthropologists have so far paid little attention to the various ideologies developed by provincial governments and their links with popular cultures. This chapter discusses ‘Eurasianism’, a theme of ideology and the political imagination that has become increasingly important in recent times. In April 2001 a Eurasian political movement was officially established in Moscow, led by the political philosopher Alexander Dugin, the advisor to the Speaker of the Duma. The movement is supportive of President Putin and apparently endorsed in a general way by his government (Yasman 2001). I shall be concerned here, however, not so much with this metropolitan movement as with the ways in which the concept of ‘Eurasia’ has enabled the governing circles of many Asian regions of Russia to create distinctive ideas about the nature of their existence within the Federation. It will be suggested here that the idea, or perhaps more correctly the ideal, of Eurasia is likely to be highly influential, both in conceptualizing federal relations and in shaping the political-cultural character of the constituent regions.

Ideology, subjectivity and the political imagination

If by ‘ideology’ we refer to the manipulation of a system of ideas in the service of dominating political interests, then in Soviet times there was only one ideology in Russia, that of the Communist Party. In the last ten years, by contrast, there has been ideological uncertainty at the centre and a burgeoning of new ideologies in the provinces. While the Moscow government has been searching for a new ‘idea’ for Russia, many regional leaderships have boldly propounded their own ideologies, including political values, policies, educational programmes, rituals and festivals, and so forth. It is not only the governments of Republics with specific ethnic profiles that have been active, such as Tatars tan, but also those of Russian provinces (oblast) where leaders want to establish a
particular character and policy for their region. What differentiates these new ideologies from the Soviet one is that they are not hegemonic even in their own areas (or perhaps, more cautiously, one should say that they are not yet hegemonic). They are designed to appeal to varied constituencies of voters and business interests in contexts where alternatives exist. At the same time, and this is what distinguishes them from the ideologies of independent countries, they are also addressed ‘upwards’ to a single centre, that is, to Moscow. The central government retains enormous financial power over the provinces, especially those which are in debt to it, including most of the Asian regions discussed in this chapter. Such resource-poor provinces simply cannot balance their budgets without substantial annual transfers from Moscow. This situation is inevitably unstable: the impulse towards independence and consolidation of local interests is countered by the periodic need to appear in the guise of loyal subjects (regional leaders personally travel to Moscow to negotiate loans and transfers with ministers). At the same time, the political messages from Moscow have varied wildly over the years, from Yeltsin’s injunction to the provinces in the early 1990s to Take all the power you can’ to Putin’s attempt to establish direct administrative control. Meanwhile, powerful and wealthy ‘oligarchs’ can suddenly transform the face of local politics by concluding some major deal in that territory, or indeed by presenting themselves as local election candidates. The ideologies expounded in the provinces are conditioned by these volatile circumstances, which are not hidden and ‘naturalized’ agendas, as in the classic formulation of ideology, but are in some sense ‘known’ by everyone via the media, gossip and rumour.

This is why ideology as a category is inadequate on its own to explain the ideational aspect of Russian politics today. While the explicit and relatively stable discourses of regional leaders intent on retaining positions of power can indeed be characterized as ideology, in the actual practice of politics they exist amid the swirling diversity of other, more open, multi-sited and creative opinions and ideas produced by all sorts of people. It is these that I call the ‘political imagination’. This term allows us to write about the ways political life is being thought, without presupposing that all such representations are attached to the hidden motives or economic interests of powerful social groups. We need to take account of the political ideas of the impoverished, those who have made fortunes and lost them, the struggling and dispossessed and those who live from day to day, the obstinately different, and the seemingly wayward people, who all together, when one thinks about it, make up the great majority of the electorate (and from among whom, in fact, many current leaders have emerged). The notion of ideology only restricts our understanding and belittles the diverse wealth of ideas, emotions and compulsions that face us here. This chapter suggests that the political imagination does not just interact with ideologies, it subsumes them, i.e. it creates a greater arena within which ideologies exist. Ideologies are thus particular and limited formations of the political imagination. The idea of the
political imagination enables us to identify the cultural sources out of which particular new ideologies arise.

Both ideologies and the political imagination are manifest in speeches, declarations, tracts, rituals, and so forth. Thus, the political imagination has a history, and this is important in considering even such a short period as the 1990s. A particular manifestation of a national ideology, for example the initiatory political moment of the presidential speech inaugurating the Kalmg Tangch (Kalmyk Republic) in 1994, had a different purpose and resonance from the trajectory of these same ideas in later years. Not only can this particular moment never be repeated, but it seems that other practices of the political imagination also ‘have their time’, as it were. There is a period when they have currency and are widely popular, while later they may become somewhat stale, or suspected of trickery; later still they can become the subject of jokes, and finally they may be replaced by other ideas. There are wider, more stable, cultural resources, notably religious ideas, which have nourished the regional conceptions of ‘Eurasia’ through processes of emptying out and replenishment at particular periods in the last decade.

At the same time, an ideal projected in the political imagination, such as that of the ‘new Kalmyk person who has nothing in common with the old Soviet subject’ (Nushkaev 1996:123) can only make sense and become effective in the context of disciplines and practices. While the political imagination is constitutive in the effects of a regional ‘sovereign state’, the daily practices of governing and appearing to govern, and of welcoming, ignoring or resisting such practices, sustain—or do not sustain—the currency of the ideas. The idea of the ‘Kalmyk person’ has to impose itself in education and ritual, such that some people at least experience themselves as this new kind of person. In effect, this is to argue for the central importance of the dimension of subjectivity. As Veyne has written, the individual is not opposed to society, nor even to the state, for ‘the individual is affected to the heart by public power in so far as he is affected in his image of himself, in the relation he has to himself, when he obeys the State or society’ (1987:7).

Taking a different approach, Mark Urban argues that any particular ideological configuration in 1990s Russia, such as the synthesis of communism and patriotism, is immediately confronted by competitors in mirror-like refractions that litter the ‘verbal battlefield in contradictory nonsense’ (1998:979). For example, the democrats’ espousal of ‘all-human values’ is said by Russian nationalists to be a treacherous imposition of false and corrupting categories, because only nations and civilizations can create values. Yet there are some nationalists who claim that what distinguishes the Russian nation above all others is the fact that its values are valid for all humanity (1998:979). Thus Urban suggests that neither personal authenticity nor logical consistency play much of a role in this exercise of the political imagination. ‘What we meet again and again is bombast, strong but shallow representations of the world that recall the concept of auto-communication’ (1998:978). These narratives are
performative, but non-practical. They are performative because leaders call into existence certain entities that play a pivotal role in their discourse, such as ‘the people’, ‘the occupation regime in the Kremlin’, and so forth. But, leadership thus constituted falls victim to its own creations, it finds itself trapped without an opening towards practice, because the entities the discourse has conjured are themselves invested with an agency of another order than that attributed to actual individuals. They exist ‘above’ the plane of mundane matters.

(Urban 1998:978)

This is essentially an argument for the separation of the political imagination, existing in a sealed-off sphere of mythicized, binary confrontations, from practical life, not in the abstract but in the particular case of present-day Russia. I would agree with Urban (and regional writers such as Guchinova 1997a) that the ‘mythic plane’ exists, but suggest that a theoretical argument, whereby the political imagination may also be manifested in historically located actions and capable of creating particular subjectivities, deserves ethnographic investigation. In particular, a certain kind of leadership, which I call ‘exemplary autocracy’, can provide the inter-subjective space for the political imagination to be actualized in society. ‘Eurasia’ may thus exist mythically in Moscow, where it is constantly challenged and even mocked, but it has a different kind of existence in the regions where subjectivities attach themselves to it.

‘Eurasia’ and the Asian peoples of Russia

The idea that Russia embodies a Eurasian, as distinct from a purely Slavic, civilization has been central to debates about Russian identity for many decades. Yet these were discussions among Russian intellectuals and, with a few exceptions, the idea seemed unacceptable to Asian peoples. What has happened recently is the widespread appropriation of this idea by Asian writers and policy-makers, who have drawn on it for their own purposes. In doing so they project regional visions of the nature of the federal union. At the same time they are creating and sustaining ideas about the nature of their own presence and cultural identity. I shall focus on the ‘Inner Asian’ regions, that is the Kalmyk, Buryat, Tuva, Sakha-Yakut and Altai Republics. It will be shown that what is emerging is a common vocabulary, rather than a single vision. The ideas of the Moscow movement are only loosely related to the images produced in the provinces, for each region has its own perspective, related to its geographical strategic position, type of leadership, electoral balance, and ethnic history during and before the Soviet period.

The crucial questions are not about current types of government, for all these regions are characterized by ‘presidential’ rather than parliamentarian forms of
power (Afanas’yev 1998). They concern the exceptional value (and the reasons for that value) to be accorded to small peripheral peoples within the imagined whole of the Russian Federation. This is a scenario that differs significantly from that of European colonial regimes, in which, as Cooper and Stoller have argued, the basic tension was ‘how a grammar of difference was continuously and vigilantly crafted as people in colonies refashioned and contested European claims to superiority’ (1997:3–4). In contemporary Russia, on the other hand, the provincial Eurasianists often carefully ignore previous regimes of difference and even downplay historical episodes of terror and repression. What is presented instead is a civilizational commonality between the remote part and the whole, and this is projected in the idea that the Eurasian continent is fated to be a great empire whether it is run by Tatar khans, Russian Tsars or Bolsheviks. This move opens up an ideational space for the phantasmatic rhetorical representation of the given regional culture as injecting its own values and practices into the project of ‘Eurasia’ as a whole.

The idea of ‘Eurasia’ is also providing an arena for new political relations to be formed between the provinces. During the Soviet period, the Inner Asian peoples of Russia had relatively few links with one another, since the predominant structure in politics, economics and culture was the centripetal relation through the hierarchy to Moscow. Indeed, the independent creation of lateral relations of a political kind would have been regarded as a violation of the central decision-making role of the Party. It is therefore significant that the 1990s saw the emergence of horizontal inter-republic relations, at least in politics and culture, if not in economics. Although President Putin is attempting to restore a strong vertical structure, not dissimilar to that of the Soviet state, the consolidation of local power regimes will not be easy to undermine. It is from these relatively secure local bases that Inner Asian leaders are making links with one another. For example, in 1998, the President of Kalmykia, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, intervened to back the main Buryat candidate in the presidential elections in Buryatia. On the cultural front, representatives from the various regions regularly visit one another to attend religious rituals, conferences, youth congresses, etc.

What is the imagined basis for such Inner Asian new ties? A plausible historical template might seem to be the Mongol Empire of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which was itself, of course, also a multi-ethnic state comprised of peoples speaking Mongol, Turkic and Tungusic languages, including the ancestors of all the peoples I am discussing. However, the Chinggisid heritage, that is the notion of the relevance today of specifically Mongol forms of government, is not one that has been developed as an ideology, although it exists in the political imaginary of these regions of Russia. Some intellectuals have argued for revival of a Mongol-centred world-view, but for the leaders of the Kalmyks, Altaians and Buryats, although a positive image of the Mongol Empire does not seem to be an impossible idea to swallow, they cannot identify publicly with it. For the contemporary state of Mongolia is seen as
economically weak. Furthermore, memories are still vivid of harsh repression of anyone accused of Pan-Mongolian sympathies and ‘Pan-Mongolism’, which is still regarded as ‘dangerous’ today (Kuz’mín and Svinin 1997). In effect, with Chechnya in the forefront of people’s minds, it seems that too open an invocation of Mongolian political precedents is still associated with peril, the danger of disloyalty to the Russian state. Such ducking and weaving to avoid direct recognition of a Mongol precedent for ‘Eurasia’ is evidence of the political nature of the contemporary concept.

Little is clear about what ‘Eurasia’ actually comprises. In part this is due to the misty and mystical character of the writings of the chief popularizer of the idea in recent times, the historian Lev Gumilev. He extols the glamour and vigour of ‘unions’ between the Slavs and the steppe peoples, the formative effect of vaguely delineated ‘environments’, the decisive effect of ‘passionate’ leaders in creating spiritually powerful states, and simultaneously (paradoxically) the inexorable ‘scientific’ or ‘natural’ basis of the success or failure of ethnic communities. In the last decade Gumilev’s books have achieved extraordinary popularity among all classes of Russians and non-Russian peoples of the Federation. As Shnirel’man and Panarin argue (2001), Gumilev’s disregard of responsible historical scholarship gave free rein to the sway of free-floating suppositions and dangerous ethnic prejudices while lending them pseudoacademic legitimacy. Yet very recently, in autumn 2000, President Putin on a visit to Kazakhstan laid a wreath on a monument to Gumilev and declared Eurasianism to be the ideology of the new Russia. He thus endorsed, and perhaps not only for Kazakh audiences, a vision of Russia’s history as determined by emotional and value-laden interpretations of specifically ethnic glories, failures, victories and deceptions. Discussions of current social and political organization (e.g. forms of government and taxation) are virtually absent, cloudily effaced by transcendent notions such as the ‘civilization of the steppes’ or ‘national destiny’. The ideational field of ‘Eurasia’ has generated mythicized binary categories, which have compelled the political imagination in Inner Asian regions towards the exaltation of their own ‘spiritual values’. But contra Urban (1998), I see this as more than just rhetoric. This ideational field has given a particular direction to actual political initiatives that, charged with fantasy as they may be, have the capacity to change society.

‘Eurasia’ in political context

‘Eurasia’ has always been an idea directed against the influence of ‘the West’ in Russia, since it proposes that Russia is not in essence a European country but a unique civilization, created by the union of the Slavic and the Turko-Mongol steppe peoples. The idea re-emerged in metropolitan circles in the 1990s in response to the perceived failure of ‘Western’ models of democracy and capitalism in Russia. In contemporary versions, the key is the importance of ‘the
state’. For example, A.S. Panarin writes that what distinguishes Russian history from that of Europe is that, in Russia, progress, and indeed all important initiatory action, derives from the state and not from civil society, i.e. ‘it comes down from above’ (Panarin 1994). The ideal state is not the exploiter but the protector of the poor and weak (Panarin 1995). Another key theme is the unity and equality of all the peoples in a common Eurasian ‘super-nation’, which distinguish it from the European colonial empires (Lyr’ye 1994). A further quality of ‘Eurasia’ is its messianic function. Quoting Toynbee’s idea that to achieve an aim you have to go not for it but for something higher, Panarin writes that this is true above all of Russia, with its religious, Manichaean radicalism. Russians will not take action for everyday reasons; they need a great idea. Eurasia as a morally pure civilization is such an idea. ‘Has the world really finished with the cosmogonic process of creating new civilizational models?’ he asks. If the answer is ‘yes’, countries all over the world have a cruel choice: either join up with the West or remain on the barbarian periphery and probably die out (1994:86).

Such ideas give rise to unresolved arguments about the delimitation of Eurasia. If ‘ecology’ and the rejection of modernization and development are taken as key spiritual values, then the geography shifts towards the east. But if Orthodox piety and asceticism are seen as the vital historical source of spirituality, then Armenia and Greece appear as relatively ‘close’, while a whole string of Catholic Slav countries are ruled out (Poland, Lithuania, etc.). Even more fraught is the question of Islamic territories. Some argue that such lands cannot be part of Eurasia as they belong to a radically different civilization, and furthermore one that stretches far beyond the sacred frontier of Russia. Others advocate including Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, but not Uzbekistan, on the grounds that the former are only lightly Islamicized and are ‘really’ steppe cultures, while the latter, with its long-settled, urban development of Islam, is essentially alien. Yet other Eurasianists argue that all the Islamic countries of the former USSR should be included in ‘Eurasia’. The reason is that, however foreign it may be, Islam has bravely made a principled stand against the corruption and power of the West (for a summary of these positions see Malashenko 1996). This is the argument ‘My enemy’s enemy is my friend’. In short, we see that ‘Eurasia’ is not a clearly delimited geopolitical space, but is, to repeat, a deeply political idea.

Certain reactions from the non-Russian regions are wary, and even directly hostile, to Eurasianism. From Buryatia, Urkhanova writes (1995) that for all the talk of admiration of eastern cultures, Eurasianism is nonetheless built on Russian great power statehood. For this reason, the imprecise inclusiveness of Eurasia is dangerous, a cloak for renewed Russian ‘imperialism’, threatening the precarious sovereignty of the regional republics. Urkhanova concludes that Buryats nevertheless cannot refuse Eurasia, because it has happened to them already. Its apogee was the Soviet Union, which irrevocably tied together the history of Buryats and Russians, bequeathing to both the tragic legacy of terror
and the camps. Tatar writers such as Khakim, on the other hand, reject Eurasianism absolutely. For them it represents a ‘deified state’ with no room for the individual or even any other opinion. The Achilles’ heel of Eurasianism, he writes, is that modern Tatars, and all Russian citizens, are already free and educated individuals, who are bound to reject its atavistic holism and collectivism (Khakim 1998:54–5).

Yet the idea of Eurasia re-surfaces among both nomenklatura-type Soviet leaders who have reinvented themselves in the new Russia and new generation leaders in the Inner Asian regions and the Central Asian states. The move is far from naive. Rather, these leaders see ‘Eurasia’ as offering opportunities, though these vary according to geopolitical position. In the case of the Inner Asian regions, Eurasia offers above all an escape from their peripherality, obscurity and insignificance. It does so by creating a confrontation between the rational, materialistic, technologically advanced, individualistic ‘West’ and the spirituality, irrationality, mysticism and collectivism of the ‘East’. The overwhelming tendency among Eurasianists is to elevate Russia’s ‘third way’, which combines the two ‘principles’, to a metaphysical plane higher than either. The Russian ‘spirit’ (dukha) is said to be supreme, and indeed stands for all humanity, because it combines within itself several mystical antitheses. For example, ‘The essence of the [third] antimony of the Russian spirit is yet another mixture of contradictory opposites—an endless freedom of spirit and slavish servility’ (Yugai, paraphrasing Berdyaev, 1998:31). The effect of this kind of vision of Russian civilization, strengthened by widely popular vitalistic ideas like Gumilev’s passionnost’ in ethnic history, is to attribute priority to the spiritual element. ‘Before the Russian soul there open the far distances and there is no bounded horizon lying before her spiritual gaze’ (Yugai 1998:31). It is this space of ‘far distances’ that provides the opening for the Inner Asian peoples. Not only can they declare that they themselves represent the spiritual superiority of ‘the East’, but they can also claim that it is precisely this ‘input’ into Russia which invigorates that country with its essential quality of dukhovnost’ (spirituality).

Thus, for the Inner Asian indigenous leaders the answer to their anxieties over real historical problems, namely that their peoples have been perceived as peripheral nonentities in the Tsarist and Soviet empires, mere appendages providing raw materials to the centre (Guchinova 1997a), lies in proclaiming and publicizing the new eminence that the notion of the Eurasian civilization potentially confers on them. Indeed, a further move is to shift the notional centre of ‘Eurasia’ away from Moscow to the east. Both Tuva and the Altai are now conceptualizing themselves as the geographic centres of Eurasian space. A consequence of this shift is that it is now Moscow that appears as materialistic, individualistic and corrupted by ‘Western values’. In both provinces, books, maps and monuments celebrate this vision. Interestingly, in these regions the basis for spiritual superiority is said to lie in ‘nature’, notably the sacred mountains of the Altai. In Buryatia, the pure and holy Lake Baikal plays the same role. Famous Eurasianists are quoted to lend weight to such quasi-religious
claims. For example, the orientalist mystic N. Roerich is cited in support of the idea that the mountain Uch Sumbur in the Altai has a direct link with the cosmos and that the entire country surrounding it is the land of Shambala, the sacred land of righteousness of the northern Buddhists (Problemy 1992:58).

What this does is to lend a sense of inevitability and inviolability to the claims: one might meet some Altaian people and query their spiritual superiority, but it is difficult to criticize a sacred mountain. At the same time, it exploits post-Soviet anxieties about ecological pollution (‘we may be poor here, but unlike those corrupted by materialism, we know the secret of pure living’).

In this image of the sacred mountain we can see how the issue of mythicization, raised by Mark Urban, can work out in practice. Uch Sumbur, in countless epics, prayers, wise sayings, and so forth, is said to have three peaks, because in the mythic vocabulary three is the proper number for a sacred mountain. In fact, anyone who goes to worship at Uch Sumber can see that it has two peaks. Yet it would be incorrect to argue that this reveals merely a contradiction between ‘myth’ and ‘practical life’, for in real life Altaians do conduct rituals of worship of this mountain, because it is sacred and therefore has three peaks.

Political configuration: the example of Kalmykia

There is an important difference between the regions of Buryatia and the Altai on the one hand and Tuva, Sakha-Yakutia and Kalmykia on the other. In the former, the indigenous people are in an electoral minority and political control is in the hands of Soviet-style, ex-Communist Russians. Consequently, proclamations about national destiny and so forth are muted for fear of arousing the wrath of the powers that be. In Tuva, Sakha and Kalmykia, on the other hand, political leadership is largely indigenous. In Tuva, there is a substantial indigenous majority party as a consequence of many Russians fleeing the republic in the early 1990s, having encountered Tuvan hostility. The authoritarian, yet non-charismatic, Tuvan President is so firmly in control, we may suppose, that extravagant flights of nationalist fantasy appear unnecessary.

In Kalmykia, on the other hand, there is quite another, much more politically intense, situation. The Kalmyks are in the majority over Russians and other nationalities, but only just. They elected in 1993 a young President, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, a millionaire businessman. Ilyumzhinov is handsome and enormously charismatic, and he also ‘designs himself in such a mould, encouraging the notion that he is the reincarnation of Janggar (hero of the famous Kalmyk epic) or the seventeenth-century Ayuki Khan re-born. He flaunts his wealth, rightly seeing that for many ordinary people his wealth is brilliant evidence of his luck and blessedness (Guchinova 1997b). At the same time, Ilyumzhinov is determined to publicize Kalmykia and put it on the world map. He engineered his election as President of FIDA, the international chess
organization, and one of his numerous extravagant acts was the construction of a luxurious ‘Chess City’ in his capital, in which to hold the Chess Olympiad. Ilyumzhinov supports the idea of Eurasia and he calls the Republic of Kalmykia ‘the land of spirit, the temple of the spirit, the planet of the spirit’ (Ilyumzhinov 1997:8). In reality, this is one of the poorest regions of the Federation, and during the 1990s the statistics have only got worse (Katushov 1998; Humphrey 2000). Vast sheep flocks created an ecological disaster in the pastures in the 1980s and now the herds have been drastically cut down, leaving rural people reduced to bare subsistence levels. There are hardly any other natural resources. Afflicted by the first AIDS epidemic in Russia, bordering on the war zone of the North Caucasus, the Kalmyks could be expected to look out on the world, from their dusty land and grim poverty, with timid apprehensiveness. Yet it is here that the political imagination has gone into overdrive.

The very day he got into power in 1993, Ilyumzhinov began setting up one of the most autocratic regimes in the whole of Russia. He abolished the Soviets and appointed his own people as ministers and ‘Presidential Representatives’ (i.e. the district governors). Local self-government is entirely absent in Kalmykia. In effect, all decisions of any importance are taken personally by the President (Guchinova 1997a: 22). A year later, Ilyumzhinov allowed general elections for a parliament (it is small, only twenty-seven members), and this body has little real power. Soon he wrote a new constitution, called the ‘Steppe Code’, based on a seventeenth-century Kalmyk precedent, and set up a Council of Elders, consisting of various respected grey-beards put forward by factories, collective farms, etc. He re-introduced the union of religion (Buddhism) and the state. Re-elected in 1995, Ilyumzhinov took the opportunity to change the constitution and extend the period of presidential office. He then initiated various prestige projects, all of which are incomplete: the building of a vast Buddhist temple, the construction of an international airport, the biggest leather factory in Russia, and a new seaport (Volgin 1999:28). Ilyumzhinov flies to meet the Pope, the Dalai Lama and Saddam Hussein. He tries to attract international capital to Kalmykia by declaring it an ‘off-shore’ tax-haven.

On the one hand, this is a bold, innovative exercise of power characteristic of the exemplary autocrat (see Humphrey 2000). At least at first, the power relations established by Ilyumzhinov were enthusiastically supported by the electors (Guchinova 1997b). All over Inner Asia ordinary people during the mid-1990s were saying, ‘If only we had a leader like that! If only we had a Kirsan!’ It is not a secret that Ilyumzhinov’s millions have a dubious origin and that he and his close kin have been involved in one financial scandal after another. But perhaps people feel the need for a magical and absolute leader, one who can absorb the black wickedness of power, with the craftiness of a chessmaster, and yet present to the world a shining, somehow admirable, surface.

On the other hand, Ilyumzhinov’s constitution, the ‘Steppe Code’, embodies the fated quality of Kalmykia’s relation with Russia. The original ‘Steppe Code’ (1640) is said to have been the expression of the only period of Kalmyk
‘statehood’. Between 1640 and 1771 a Kalmyk khanate existed within the wider polity of the Russian Tsars (Guchinova 1997a: 57–9). Why should a contemporary leader wish to resurrect this precedent? We should remember that the Kalmyks have a deeply tragic history. They experienced massive loss of life when, in 1771, the Torgut elite and their followers fled from Russian incursions back to their original homeland in Mongolia (resulting in the abolition of the khanate), later during the Civil War, around 1920, and again in 1943, when the entire population was deported to Siberia, Central Asia and Sakhalin. The khanate is now seen as a golden age, before any of these tragedies. Its adherence to Russia is imagined as a Voluntary union’, personified in a meeting between Ayuki Khan and Peter the Great. This echoes the standard Soviet account as well as the Eurasian vision of mythic harmony of the metropolis with the steppe. More significant is how aspects of Mongolian political culture surface undeclared in the new ‘Steppe Code’. Political relations are imagined in similarly ‘kingly’ terms to those of the mediaeval Mongol chronicles—in which individual leaders stand for peoples and oaths of loyalty are what count.

The 1990s ‘Steppe Code’ does not include a statute about separation from the Russian Federation. Ilyumzhinov was in fact criticized by a quasi-opposition (there is no constitutional opposition) on this point. ‘Why did you not demand the same sovereignty other regions have taken?’ he was asked. But this was mere rhetoric, in the mythic style Urban describes, for the very same ‘oppositionists’, who were Communists, hotly demanded that central state order be imposed by military force in nearby Chechnya. Guchinova, a Kalmyk political observer, points out how the entire, sporadic opposition to Ilyumzhinov is couched in the old Soviet vocabulary (1997a: 26). It has no positive alternative economic programme, but rests on stale accusations of ‘treachery’ (izmena), and ‘debt’ (dolg) before the people. It is fairly clear that Ilyumzhinov used his ‘loyalty’ to Russia (i.e. not insisting on the separation clause) as a bargaining chip in negotiations over the budget transfers from Moscow, the life-blood of his economy. But we can perhaps see a deeper meaning to this situation, for the Soviet deportations were seen by many ordinary Kalmyks as a fated punishment for their own sins in neglecting Buddhism (Guchinova 1997a: 61). Although the thirteen years of exile may now be spoken of as unjust, for decades after their return to Kalmykia people were ashamed and frightened to mention it—to the extent that most of the younger generation only heard about it in the 1990s and then often from public sources. Another example of this attitude concerned a Russian from Moscow, who was appointed Prime Minister in Ilyumzhinov’s government. He was forced to resign after he had rashly mentioned the word ‘resettlement’; even though this was in a quite different context, it was widely held that his outspokenness offended local norms of decency, of silence, of preserving a soft, smiling ‘Asian’ face over internal disagreements and humiliations (Volgin 1999). Guilt, shame and anger are unresolved, and in this situation the Russian state appears in reified form as the inevitably present, quasisacred instrument of punishment (perhaps still seen by some as the instrument of retribution for sins).
Ilyumzhinov combines extreme local autocracy with a rather close ‘princely’ relation to Moscow, cemented by marriage links (unfortunately for him, with Luzhkov, the Mayor of Moscow, rather than the new forces of Putin). He calls the Russian Federation ‘Eurasia’, and he is the supreme example of the strategy of claiming to represent the spiritual wealth of Asia. In the Kalmyk case, this claim cannot rest on cosmic mountains or sacred seas. Instead, Ilyumzhinov’s ideology proclaims its promotion of world religions, first of all Buddhism, but also Orthodoxy and Catholicism. When he was elected President, Ilyumzhinov wanted to grant land to the Dalai Lama, to provide him with a permanent home in Kalmykia. This idea withered in the face of Chinese protests and warnings of its inadvisability from the security services, but along with numerous Buddhist temples built by the laity, the President did erect a large marble statue of the Buddha in the centre of his capital, Elista. When it was realised that the statue of Lenin (whose part-Kalmyk ancestry is not forgotten) faced the other way, the pedestal of the Bolshevik leader’s monument was turned round so the two could appear face to face (Guchinova 2001). Ilyumzhinov built a large and beautiful Orthodox cathedral, and even, after his visit to the Pope, a Catholic church. In placards and portraits the President regularly appears flanked by one or another world religious leader. However, Ilyumzhinov also claims a more indigenous source of inspiration, the ‘wisdom of the ancestors’ (mudrost’ predkov). His political vision is to produce new generations of young Kalmyks, transformed by this ancestral wisdom (both religious and secular, but always ‘spiritual’), who will flood into Russia-Eurasia to inspire and re-invigorate that land. He has appointed a Minister of Ideology and set up a school programme, with a new pedagogical methodology, to produce these young people. They are called Lichnosti, with a capital L (‘Persons’ or ‘Personalities’). They are to achieve moral harmony, personal independence of judgement and youthful super-talent and energy. This is to be done through learning and practising the ancestral wisdom. For example, the Kalmyk version of chess has been made obligatory in all schools, as it is said to inculcate a specifically ‘Asian’ ability to reason and take bold decisions. Just as importantly, wisdom is to be achieved through following the exemplar of the President himself. Teachers and delegates have been sent from Kalmykia throughout Inner Asia to propagate these ideas.

Meanwhile, we can observe that such visions, which are crafted by intellectuals close to the President as well as Ilyumzhinov himself, interact with popular culture and also have a history. The epic Janggar is genuinely admired by many Kalmyks, and in the early 1990s they responded to the idea of Ilyumzhinov’s identity with the hero. People declared him to have been ‘given by God’, and clan leaders prayed to their deities to protect him (Guchinova 1997b). By the end of the decade the deification of the President, the idea that he is actually the reincarnation of a mythic hero, was little heard. Another telling example of such historical waxing and waning was described to me from the Altai. In 1998 there was a public ritual at a holy site, where three retired women teachers were ‘possessed’ by spirits. A Kalmyk delegate attended this
event, and she observed, ‘You Altaians are three years behind Kalmykia. We had old women receiving that kind of message from the cosmos a few years back, but now we don’t pay them so much attention.’

Such waxing and waning of particular ideas does not mean that the ‘Eurasian’ political imagination is dying out. Rather, it seems to be transmuting into more everyday, yet fundamental, assumptions that form part of subjectivities. One example is the discourse of the ethnic ‘gene-fund’, which we now find appearing throughout Russia as the dominant way of conceiving identity. In the case of Inner Asian people the ‘gene-fund’ idea can be mapped on to (and through) an imagined history of statehood. Altaians, for example, are saying that Russia is the genetic successor of the Eurasian Turko-Mongol states of the seventh to twelfth centuries, just as the Altaian people are the genetic descendants of those who made up the Dzhungarian khanate. ‘Statehood is like a dress you wear,’ said one Altaian. ‘It changes all the time, for a hundred years you live in this state, for three hundred years in that. Your name may change. But we remain the same, genetically and by our spirit. We are we’

The gene-fund idea is related to the new discourse of clanship and the aristocratic ‘white bone’, ideas that had been completely illegitimate in Soviet times. Ordinary Kalmyks today might say, for example, that a certain person is suited to rule because he is a Torgut.

Another field for the political imagination is the idea of ‘ethno-pedagogy’, whereby particular local cultural ‘traditions’ can be inculcated in the young generation. In Tuva and the Altai, for example, schoolchildren are taken to holy sites (springs, mountains, sacred trees, etc.) and given classes in how to participate in the rites. In Kalmykia, ethno-pedagogy has been actualized in the form of spiritual education intended to train the ‘descendants’ of the ancestors. It includes

traditions of thought and life, the philosophy of Buddhism, heroism, love of peace, and wisdom, customs and rituals, dances, songs, love of work, the cultivation of health and the body, respect for the ancestors and the elders, and love for the young, all of which comprises the Spirit and Will of the Kalmyks.

(Nuskhaev 1996:92)

In Kalmykia, the gene-fund idea and ethno-pedagogy combine, for the generations of young ‘Persons’ are conceived as ‘our gene-fund, which we will pour into and gift to Russia-Eurasia’ (Nuskhaev 1996:117).

Ideas like the reincarnation of historical heroes, the spiritual significance of landscape or the cyclical re-transmission of ancestral spirituality from deceased grandparents to newborn children, are absolutely current among ordinary people. These ideas, and the images produced by political leaders, feed on one another, linking together the ‘modern’, ‘scientific’ genetic discourse with the emphasis on inherent Asian spirituality. Scattered evidence suggests that the interaction
between the specific ideology produced by Ilyumzhinov’s government and the wider field of the political imagination does produce some subjective effect—that is, it appears in the self-related actions and speech of subjects who emotionally either uphold the ideology or revolt against it. For example, it seems that Ilyumzhinov received a stream of letters from people saying that they disagreed so strongly about his new policies that there were family ‘schisms’ (raskol), husbands and wives got divorced and children left the family home (Ilyumzhinov 1996:15–16). Of course, subjectivity works in an authoritarian political context in various ways, through various possible types of identification (Salecl 1994:50). But to go so far as to get divorced ‘because of you’, as people wrote to Ilyumzhinov, is evidence that the new ideologies are not simply imposed by state structure and state force; they are also deeply felt by people as part of their lives, one way or another. This appears not simply in conflicts between, for example, the atheism of an older generation and the new beliefs, but engages a far wider and more complex range of disjunctive ideas. The concept of ‘Eurasia’ creates a new field in which images of the body, physical beauty, and kin relations can be realigned. As Guchinova argues (2001), young Kalmyks, who accept the fact of a fundamental ‘Asian phenotype’, nevertheless seek to re-imagine themselves in relation to specifically European images of beauty and sexual attractiveness. Responding to alternative geographical delineations of where ‘Europe’ begins and ‘Asia’ ends (see Bassin 1991), they claim that they are the ‘only Buddhists in Europe’ (Guchinova 2001).

**Conclusion**

I have argued that ‘Eurasia’ provides an arena of the political imagination in which the Inner Asian peoples can claim a dignified place. The logic of the counterposition of ‘West’ to ‘East’, with the superiority of Russia over both, resting on its civilizational harmonic spirituality, pushes the small Inner Asian peoples in the only direction they can take, to proclaim their value as a superspiritual one. I have been told that many ordinary Kalmyks already regard such statements as ideological hyperbole, as the ‘over-the-top’ pronouncements of someone who belonged to the early stage of Kalmyk statehood. Yet the structural position of Nuskaev’s great ideas in the realm of the political imaginary, such as the concept of the Personalities destined to flow into Russia, is not dissimilar to the more ‘traditional’ notion of the three peaks of the sacred mountain of the Altai. These ideas have been subject to a process of ideologization, yet they emerge from a distinctive and particular location in the post-Soviet world. As Ram has argued in an interesting article on the Kazakh writer Suleimenov (2001:310), Eurasianism is more than just an ideological preference. It involves a poetic reflection on the taken-for-grantedness of central categories, such as language and history in the case of Suleimenov, or kinship and individuality in the case of the Kalmyks. Indeed, we find in Kalmykia an extraordinary hyper imaginary.
What has all this got to do with real politics? It is true that ‘Eurasia’ has no economic content, and the only attempt to propose it as a contemporary political structure in the mid-1990s, by President Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan, fell on largely deaf ears (Prazauskas 1995). Yet the Eurasia Movement has recently become rather prominent in Moscow. It has attracted a number of important religious leaders—Orthodox, Islamic, Jewish and Buddhist—to its rallies. Furthermore, its values are an important element in the broad stream of Russian nationalism and it shares a vocabulary with a large variety of political forces, from the Communists to the National Socialists (Malashenko 1996:105).

Seemingly esoteric terms and the debate on the nature of ‘mentality’ (razum) are part of the general intellectual currency. It should not be forgotten that both Yeltsin and Putin have stated publicly that contemporary Russia needs its own distinctive ideology in order to re-invigorate its people for the new millennium. It is not a large step from this to the spiritual revolution (perevorot) called for by Eurasianists like A.S. Panarin (1994:90). For internal consumption, Putin has laid his cards on the table. His first major speech as President called for a new version of ‘the Russian Idea’, which has the following four components: belief in the greatness of Russia; statism; community-mindedness; and patriotism. His acclamation of the Eurasian idea in Kazakhstan shows that he is fully aware of the currency of the notion in the Asian regions. In such a context, one can see the attraction of ‘Eurasia’ for non-Russian peoples. They know it is in a sense fantasy. But it is a chimera that relates them to a powerful discourse, and its very fantastic nature is what offers the possibility of heroically throwing off past humiliations. Like the three peaks of the sacred mountain, it is a super-reality that nevertheless guides people to act in certain ways.

There are many self-declared polities in the world today, particularly in post-Soviet space, which have an uncertain political status within larger entities. They are internationally unrecognized, usually dependent economically; no one in them knows their rights, and no one outside them cares. Such places raise issues of how anthropologists should think about ‘the state’ (cf. Trouillot 2001). No simple structural delineation is adequate, for there are differently weighted sites within the political space of ‘the state’, from which imaginaries of empowered existence take form. These visions posit a homology between cultural identity and statehood, something that is always imaginatively possible but seems to be most conspicuously manifested in present-day Russia in those regions where an autocratic exemplary leader is able to force them into existence. The notion of ‘Eurasia’ has its dangers—perhaps particularly in its Russian nationalist versions, which have hardly been touched on here—for it distracts attention away from institutions, rights and responsibilities, and entirely ignores the poverty and corruption that are so endemic in Russia. But paradoxically it is impelled by a generous vision from the Inner Asian peoples, one in which different cultural-political entities contribute to one another rather than seeking harm and conflict. The interesting questions are to what extent ‘the state’ of Russia will continue to nourish itself on such phantasmagoric ‘ideas’, whether ‘Eurasia’ will cease to be a field of discussion and crystallize into an
ideology, and if so, whether it will be confined to the sphere of internal politics, as at present, or spill over on to the international scene.

Notes

1. For a study of how this ideology was disseminated through the Soviet ritual system, see Lane 1981.
2. In 1996, Yeltsin set up a commission to produce an ideology for Russia, with no conclusive results (Urban 1998:969). Virtually the first act of Vladimir Putin, when he became Acting President, was to issue a statement of his version of 'the Russian idea'; yet it was still impossible for agreement to be reached on the words of the national anthem (Sury 1999:140).
3. Examples are Kemerovo Oblast under the leadership of Aman Tuleev (Luk’yanova 1999) and Saratov Oblast under the leadership of Dmitrii Ayatskov (Malyakin 1998).
4. For example, the wealthy Moscow singer Josif Kobzon, rumoured to be closely linked to criminal circles, presented himself for election in the Aga Buryat National Okrug in 1997. He was elected by an enormous majority (Namsaraeva 1997).
5. Eurasian ideas were revived only in the late 1980s.
6. Discussions of the Eurasian character of Russia culminated in the 1920s in a movement among Russian emigrés that elaborated Russia's special mission in world history. Among the most prominent of these writers was N.S.Trubetskoi, who proposed that out of two formational streams, the Aryan Slavic and the Turanian (Turkic, Mongolian and Finno-Ugrian) cultures, Russia formed its own original third messianic civilization. P.N.Savitskii emphasized the unification of settled and steppe-nomadic peoples and the importance of the Tatar yoke' in the political traditions of Russia (Sokolov 1999). See also Bassin 1991 and articles in Anthropology and Archaeology of Eurasia 36(4) (1998) and 37(1) (1998).
8. Kuz’min and Svinin write that a revival of Pan-Mongolism would result in the domination of the Halh-Mongols and thus disadvantage Turkic peoples like the Tuvinians and Kazakhs. They conclude: 'Other paths must be found to integrate the peoples on an ethnic basis, but avoiding this dangerous field which would re-draw historical given state boundaries' (1997:9).
9. Panarin is a conservative, anti-Western Moscow philosopher who combines admiration for Eurasianism with Russian Orthodoxy.
10. President Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan was so taken with the idea that be suggested in 1994 the creation of a 'Eurasian Union' (EAS), as an alternative to the Commonwealth of Independent States. This was to be a primarily security-focused union of equal states, with its own elected parliament, executive organs and a common economic and defence policy. The proposal was seriously considered only by Russia and Kazakhstan, however. Russia was interested in advancing its geostrategic position, while Kazakhstan had an interest in an ideology that would link its two main populations, Russians and Kazakhs (Prazauskas 1995:173–8).

The world is eternally divided into two parts—the East and the West. This is not only a geographical division, but also the order of things, founded on the very nature of intelligent being; these are two principles, corresponding to two dynamic forces of nature, two ideas, embracing the whole living structure of the human race.

11 *Passionarnost’* is the extraordinary capacity of certain small groups, infused with patriotism and prepared to violate all social norms, to strive passionately to create new ethnic unities and make them flourish ‘biologically’ and politically (Shnirel’mann and Panarin 2001:20–7).

12 For example, an account from the Altai reads:

At the forum there was a map of Eurasia. And there on the map was the Mountain Altai, delimited by a square. It is extremely interesting and significant that this point is equidistant from all four oceans (the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Polar Sea and the Indian Ocean). Seemingly, it is not by accident that the ancient Indian sutras and the Altaian *Sudur-Bichik* both count this point of the Eurasian continent as the belly-button of the earth, in Altaian, *d’erdig kindigi*. *(Problemy 1992:58)*

13 I am grateful to Agnieszka Halemba for this information.

14 According to opinion polls carried out in 1997–8, just over half the population ‘do not trust’ the Kalmyk government (Katushov 1998:327). It is not clear, however, if this attitude also applies to Ilyumzhinov personally.

15 In the words of the President, this was an agreement ‘sealed by the Wise Behest (Zavet) of Ayuki Khan and Peter the Great about the close union between two peoples’ (Ilyumzhinov 1997:13).

16 Agnieszka Halemba, personal communication.

17 Agnieszka Halemba, personal communication.

18 Agnieszka Halemba, personal communication.

19 El’za-Bair Guchinova, personal communication. In recent years, people are proudly renaming villages, trading firms and shops by the name of their clan.

20 Another example is the book published by Nuskhaev, the Minister of Propaganda, which contains diagrams locating the ‘mental life (razumnaya zhizn’) of Russia’ within hierarchical cosmologies containing such entities as the ‘All-spirit of Russia’, the ‘Noosphere’ and the ‘Planetary passionate Spirit of the Earthling’ (1996:142–3). The Eurasian *(yevraziets)*, writes Nuskhaev, ‘is pan-ethnos, all-ethnos, or All-spirit. And All-spirit means unifying and absorbing in itself all the spirits: Russian, Kalmyk, Tatar, Bashkir, Buryat, and so forth’ (1996:125).

References


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