

Another Last Eurasianist: **Özgür Tüfekçi*** *Davutoğlu's Eurasianist Rhetoric*

Abstract

This article examines the concept of Eurasianism in relation to Turkey's Foreign Policy during the Ahmet Davutoğlu era. It argues that in the post-2005 era, Turkey has pursued a proactive foreign policy course under Davutoğlu's leadership, and that this foreign policy has a whiff of Eurasianism, even if Davutoğlu's interpretation emphasizes a different aspect of Eurasianism with different policy implications. However, both interpretations have similar instrumentalist nature. While Classical/Neo-Eurasianists attempt to justify Russia's Great Power status, Davutoğlu undertakes to put forward Turkey's actual potential and strategic importance for the rest of the continent.

* Özgür Tüfekçi is the founder and Director-General of Centre for Strategic Research & Analysis which can be reached at www.cesran.org.

Turkey is a rapidly developing country and the largest economy in Central and Eastern Europe.¹ Thanks to its \$772 billion GDP, it is the sixteenth biggest economy among the 30 OECD countries². Much of the credit for this progress goes to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his government, who have gradually liberalized the economy since coming to power in 2003. In addition to its economic success, Turkey has also come into prominence as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East, a strategy developed and pursued by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in recent years. However, it would be naïve to think that the ambitions of Davutoğlu's Turkey are restricted to becoming a bridge. Given its a unique potential, Turkey would like to become a middle power; even a regional power. Once an underdeveloped country without a significant role in world politics, it is now an enthusiastic and prominent actor in the international arena. Turkey's economic and diplomatic success over the past decade has yielded impressive results.

During this time, Turkey has been repeatedly accused of changing its axis. In this sense, Davutoğlu has been charged with being a Neo-Ottomanist and even a Eurasianist. This paper, following a short introduction to the Eurasianist school of thinking, will analyze the ways in which

Davutoğlu's rhetoric overlaps with Eurasianist discourses.

Eurasianist School of Thought: Since the Beginning of the 20th Century

Eurasianism is a political concept which first emerged in the 1920s among Russian émigrés in various European countries such as Poland, France, Bulgaria, Germany, etc. The main aim was to make Russia's domination of Eurasia possible and enable its imperial ambitions. It would be logical to say that Eurasianism has inherited the notions of benevolent imperialism and Orthodox messianic features, and that and a 'third way' of economic development between capitalism and communism is possible.³ Three of the minds behind the school were Prince N. S. Trubetskoy, P. N. Savitsky, and P. P. Sucvhinsky. The principal fathers presented four principles of Eurasianism in order to explicitly articulate what is Eurasianism. According to them, first principle was Anti-Westernism. At that time, the West was perceived, aside from United States of America, as Western Europe. In this context, the creators of Eurasianism eschewed Western civilization and sympathized with non-European cultures.⁴ The second principle was the uniqueness of Russia and Russian culture. The third principle was that Eurasianism promised a

1 <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/turkey/gdp-growth>

2 <http://www.hazine.org.tr/en/index.php/turkish-economy/output-growth>

3 <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav080205a.shtml>

4 M. Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism...* p. 26;

third way, between capitalism and socialism, liberalism and dictatorship.⁵ The fourth and final principle was the anti-monarchist vision of Eurasianism.

The Eurasianist philosophy faded with the death of the founding fathers, until the 1990s when Lev Gumilev took the lead and dubbed himself as “the Last Eurasianist”. Gumilev provided a link between Classical Eurasianism and Neo-Eurasianism. However, unlike Trubetskoy or Savitsky, Gumilev did not focus on Eurasianism or share Eurasianists thoughts. In fact, he criticized them harshly and claimed that the founding fathers lacked knowledge of the theory of ethnogenesis.⁶ With regard to his way of handling the concept of Eurasian and Russian

The Eurasianist philosophy faded with the death of the founding fathers, until the 1990s when Lev Gumilev took the lead and dubbed himself as “the Last Eurasianist”.

identity, it is undisputable that he is a supporter of Eurasianism. According to Gumilev, Eurasia is the Great Steppe between the Yellow river and the Arctic Ocean⁷. And like the founding fathers, he took into account that

5 D. Y. Shlapentokh, 'Russia's Foreign Policy and Eurasianism', 1995, www.eurasianet.org [Accessed, 03 January 2009].

6 M. Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire*, (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Centre Press, 2008) p. 58;

7 Quoted in M. Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism...*, p. 70.

Gumilev's Neo-Eurasianism was embraced by Alexandr Dugin and Alexandr Panarin following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Eurasia overlaps with the territory of the former Soviet Union.⁸

On the history of Russia, Gumilev's thinking overlapped with Classical Eurasianism. He believed that the Mongols had had a special impact on Russian statehood. Genghis Khan's principles were embraced in the construction of a successful state structure. What distinguishes Gumilev from the founding fathers is religion. He thought that the Orthodoxy was one of the determining factors in shaping Russian identity. Thus when the Golden Horde adopted Islam, the Mongols lost their influence.

Gumilev's Neo-Eurasianism was embraced by Alexandr Dugin and Alexandr Panarin following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Henceforth it has been perceived as one of the *restorationist* movements of Russia. This slightly differentiated version of Classical Eurasianism assumes that Russia is culturally closer to Asia than to the West.

Contrary to Gumilev and Dugin, Panarin was a more liberal and centrist Eurasianist. In this context, he has greater respect for democracy and

8 M. Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism...*, p. 70.

Eurasianist school of thought was introduced to Turkey's intelligentsia during the post-Cold War era.

human rights.⁹ Furthermore, Laruelle alleges that many Russian scholars consider Panarin intellectually superior to Dugin,¹⁰ though Dugin is one of the most prolific Eurasianists. His most popular book is *The Foundations of Geopolitics: Russia's Geopolitical Future* (1997). In this book it is clear that Dugin, who perceives himself as a geo-politician, has been influenced by the great geopoliticians such as Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), Karl Haushofer (1869-1946), Friedrich Naumann (1860-1919), and Sir Halford Mackinder (1861-1947).¹¹

In his book, Dugin divides the world into four civilizational zones/poles: the Anglo-American zone, the Euro-African zone, the Pan-Eurasian zone, and the Pacific-Far East zone. According to Dugin, these zones counterbalance each other. The reason Dugin proposes these divisions is to counter-balance and indeed halt the globalization process and spread of American hegemony: he believes that the most important enemy of all nation-states is the United States of

9 A. P. Tsygankov, 'Hard-Line Eurasianism and Russia's Contending Geopolitical Perspectives', *East European Quarterly*, 32 (1998), 315-334 (p. 331).

10 M. Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism...*, p. 86.

11 V. Yasmann, 'Red Religion: An Ideology of Neo-Messianic Russian Fundamentalism', *Demokratizatsiya*, 1 (1993), 20-38, (p. 22)..

America. Opposition to the West or the United States can also be found in Gumilev and Panarin.

Gumilev declares that:

“The Turks and the Mongols can be genuine friends, but the English, the French and the Germans, I am convinced, can only be cunning exploiters... Let me tell you a secret: If Russia will be saved, then only as a Eurasian power, and only through Eurasianism”, because “harm has always come to us from the West”.¹²

According to Panarin, the West was the exploiter of human rights and source of oppression. Panarin believed that the US poses a risk not only to Russia but also to the rest of the world. The development of a uni-polar world, therefore, must be prevented.

Eurasianist school of thought was introduced to Turkey's intelligentsia during the post-Cold War era. As some argues that Eurasianism is a left-wing conception of national fascism, this school has been welcomed by several groups from left-wing and right-wing in Turkey. That is why; Turkey's intellectual circles have by and large named Eurasianists in Turkey as *Ulusalci*.

12 Quoted in M. Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism...*, p. 73.

Davutoğlu's Way of Thinking: A Hint of Eurasianism

Following the November 2002 elections, Davutoğlu was appointed as Chief Adviser to the Prime Minister and Ambassador at large by the 58th Government of the Republic of Turkey. He continued to serve in the 59th and 60th Governments. On May 1, 2009 he was appointed as the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the 60th Government of the Republic of Turkey.¹³

Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu owes his reputation to his book "Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position". Davutoğlu's masterpiece is one of the works that has inspired the masses and influenced small but powerful elites, and changed the world by causing shifts in mind-sets and paradigms.¹⁴ In his book Davutoğlu claims that the consolidation of political and economic stability would enable Turkey to play a peace-promoting role in neighboring regions. His *strategic depth* concept in order to help Turkey transition from being a peripheral actor in world politics to a central one features two elements: geopolitical and historical-cultural inheritance. These are the main components that differentiate Turkey from its neighbors.¹⁵

13 <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/ahmet-davutoglu.en.mfa>

14 <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-EdContributors/Article.aspx?id=283825>

15 B. Aras, "Davutoğlu Era in Turkish Foreign Policy", SETA Policy Brief, No. 32, May 2009; J. W. Walker, "Introduction: The Sources of Turkish Grand Strategy – 'Strategic Depth' and 'Zero-Problems' in Context", <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/>

Davutoğlu conceptualizes his *strategic depth* doctrine through four principles: "A secure neighborhood based on a common understanding of security, pro-active, high-level political dialogue with all neighbors, fostering regional economic interdependence and finally, promoting "multi-cultural, multi-sectarian peace and harmony."¹⁶

Under the light of this way of thinking, Davutoğlu has been repeatedly criticized as being Neo-Ottomanist or Eurasianist, even if he has rejected the claims at every turn. Yet the whiff of Eurasianism can be identified in his discourses and actions. In order to prove this claim, five indicators are presented below:

Indicator 1

On 24th November 2009, Davutoğlu said that

"Former U.S. President Bill Clinton asked me why Turkey is actively dealing with the regional problems; I answered, 'Draw a circle with a diameter of 1000 km around Turkey and 20 states will fall into it. Then draw one with a diameter of 3000 km and 70 states will fall within. If we draw a

[publications/reports/pdf/SR007/introduction.pdf](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/publications/reports/pdf/SR007/introduction.pdf), [Accessed on 04/04/2012].

16 A. Davutoğlu, *Keynote Speech, Turkey's Foreign Policy in a Changing World: Old Alignments and New Neighbourhoods*, International Conference, Oxford University, 30 April – 02 May 2010, p. 9.

similar circle around the US, how many states would fall into that? In this sense, of course Turkey will continue dealing with the problems of our neighbors.”¹⁷

This discourse explicitly reflects Eurasianist thinking. From Panarin’s perspective, ethnic nationalism should be condemned, as it is a product of Europe’s pagan sentiment. In this regard, states in Eurasia should deal with each other’s problems regardless of religion, race, color, creed, nationality, social status, etc. At first glance, Davutoğlu’s and Panarin’s approaches overlap, but this is insufficient evidence for the claim that Davutoğlu pursues a Eurasianist foreign policy understanding.

Indicator 2

Yet, there are other factors that indicate that Davutoğlu has embraced an element of Eurasianist thinking. For instance, Davutoğlu alleges that Turkey is a “central country with multiple regional identities that cannot be reduced to one unified character.”¹⁸ That is why “in terms of its area of influence, Turkey is a Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf, and Black Sea country”.¹⁹

¹⁷ <http://www.haber7.com/haber/20091124/Ahmet-Davutoglu-Evet-yeni-Osmanliyiz.php>

¹⁸ A. Davutoğlu, ‘Turkey’s Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007’ *Insight Turkey*, 10 (2008), 77-96 (p. 78).

¹⁹ A. Davutoğlu, ‘Turkey’s Foreign Policy Vision: ...’, p. 79.

Davutoğlu alleges that Turkey is a “central country with multiple regional identities that cannot be reduced to one unified character.”

In this regard, Turkey is relatively economically and politically stable, making it a viable international actor in the regions. In this context, while the incumbent Government wants to exert political, economic, and cultural influence within the formerly Ottoman lands, it also strives to open up a new horizon by improving its relations with the states from the Yellow Sea to Latin America.

These kinds of aims and policies seem like a small-scale Eurasianist vision, especially building relationships with both the Western and the Eastern World. In addition, even it may be alleged that AKP’s foreign policy stance in the post-2005 era represents

AKP’s foreign policy stance in the post-2005 era represents the transition from Western-oriented to Eastern-oriented, or as Ziya Öniş’s calls it, “soft Euro-Asianism”.

the transition from Western-oriented to Eastern-oriented, or as Ziya Öniş’s calls it, “soft Euro-Asianism”.²⁰ Hav-

²⁰ Z. Öniş and S. Yılmaz, ‘Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era’, *Turkish Studies*, 10 (2009), 7-24 (p. 13).

ing said that, Öniş defines his soft Euro-Asianism approach as “foreign policy activism is pursued with respect to all neighboring regions but with no firm EU axis as was previously the case.”²¹

Indicator 3

While Eurasianists attribute importance to the geopolitical location of Russia, Davutoğlu also puts forward the uniqueness of Turkey and its position. According to N. S. Trubetskoy, “The territory of Russia ... constitutes a separate continent ... which in contrast to Europe and Asia can be called *Eurasia* ... Eurasia represents an integral whole, both geographically and anthropologically”.²² And, this separate continent was a self-contained geographical entity whose boundaries coincided roughly with those of the Russian Empire in 1914.²³

Similarly, by alleging that Turkey cannot be “explained” geographically or culturally by associating it with a single region, Davutoğlu seeks to emphasize the geographical significance of Turkey:

Turkey’s geography gives it a specific central country status, which differs from other cen-

21 Z. Öniş and S. Yılmaz, ‘Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: ...’, p. 13.

22 Quoted in S. Wiederkehr, ‘Forging a Concept: ‘Eurasia’ in Classical Eurasianism’, *Annual Soyuz Symposium at Princeton University*, (2007a), p.1.

23 C. J. Halperin, ‘George Vernadsky, Eurasianism, the Mongols, and Russia’, *Slavic Review*, 41 (1982), 477-493, (p. 481).

tral countries. For example, Germany is a central country in Central Europe, which is far from Asia and Africa. Russia is another central country in the lands of Europe and Asia, which is far from Africa. Iran is a central country in Asia, which is far from Europe and Africa. Taking a broader, global view, Turkey holds an optimal place in the sense that it is both an Asian and European country and is also close to Africa through the Eastern Mediterranean. A central country with such an optimal geographic location cannot define itself in a defensive manner. It should be seen neither as a bridge country which only connects two points, nor a frontier country, nor indeed as an ordinary country, which sits at the edge of the Muslim world or the West.²⁴

Obviously, this is a Turkish interpretation of Eurasianism, with a clear emphasis on Turkey’s centrality.

Indicator 4

In a speech on February 4th, 2010, Davutoğlu proclaimed:

“Eurasia is passing a very critical threshold and a new vision is necessary in evaluating the region. The first [step]

24 A. Davutoğlu, ‘Turkey’s Foreign Policy Vision: ...’, p. 78.

is that uncertainties should be removed and political dialogue should be heightened. Secondly, Eurasia is the region where international economic politics takes shape; if it is neglected, the EU, Chinese or Indian economic bases cannot interact with one another... Ankara favors activating dialogue channels on the highest level and establishing permanent mechanisms as exemplified by recent Turkish-Russian plans to establish a high-level strategic council... We would like to see more political dialogue and more political cooperation. No country can live isolated. There is a need for more integration and more dialogue when there is a problem. We want to spread our policy of zero problems and maximum cooperation with neighbors to Eurasia... We need to remove the barriers between us. People should move freely. Currently Turkey and Russia are working on lifting visa requirements for each other's citizens... We want such an approach in Eurasia based on self-confidence, political dialogue and economic interaction. We see the fate of this region as our fate and as the fate of humanity."²⁵

²⁵ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=fm-calls-for-more-political-dialogue-in->

This is the basis of what the Classical Eurasianists wanted to establish via a Eurasian Union. According to them, Eurasianism provided a theoretical structure to prevent the collapse of the Russian Empire. In the event of its collapse, the theory sought to build a new nation encompassing the whole Eurasian people under a single Eurasian state. This state would have a unique culture reflecting the characteristics of whole Turanian races (The 'Turanian' nations include, according to the Eurasians, the Finno-Ugric nations, Samoyeds, Turks – including Ottoman Turks, various Tatars, Bashkirs, Turkmen, Kirgiz, Yakuts, Chuvash, a few extinct peoples such as Khazars, Bulgars, Polovtsy, Ugurians and, finally, Mongols and Manchurians), instead of the Russian element. In this vein, as Davutoğlu points out, an increase in political dialogue, economic interdependence and cultural interaction would constitute the primary phase of founding the Union.

Indicator 5

On the other hand, Davutoğlu's call for a Eurasian Union is an unquestionable indication of the element of Eurasianism in his thinking. This call has been a touchstone in terms of evaluating the dynamics of Turkish foreign policy. On February 5th, 2010 Davutoğlu stated:

“There is a need to embark on a new vision in order to have the

eurasia-2010-02-04

Eurasia region regain its historical importance... If peace and welfare do not reign in Eurasia, it is not possible to make peace and welfare reign in the world, either. This region can export peace and welfare to the rest of the world... The western and eastern ends of Eurasia should be reconnected...²⁶

Conclusion

This article has argued that Davutoğlu's interpretation of Eurasianism has been instrumental: how to reap the maximum benefits by utilizing Turkey's unique properties, located in a unique geopolitical position, and with deep historical connections with Eurasian countries. His way of thinking should not be understood merely in terms of a factual statement regarding its location in Europe and Asia or of an axis shifting from West to East. It should be understood as a justification of Turkey's claim to international status with a commensurable role in global and regional affairs.

Despite claims that Davutoğlu's way of thinking represents Neo-Ottomanism or a shifting axis for Turkey, it is safe to say that Davutoğlu shares a number of perspectives with the Eurasianists. Even if he cannot be dubbed "Another 'Last' Eurasianist", his approach is closer to the Eurasianism than Neo-Ottomanism.

²⁶ <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/news-200653-102-davutoglu-calls-for-eurasian-union.html>