



# State Ideology, Science, and Pseudoscience in Russia

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## Abstract

*This paper recounts the entangled histories of three distinctly Russian movements, namely: Soviet state ideology, Russian cosmism, and Eurasianism. Despite harboring pseudoscientific and mystical ideas specific to Russia, all three intellectual movements have been propagated by their followers as “universal sciences,” and all three have vied for scientific supremacy and universal acceptance. Suppressed by the Bolsheviks and their state ideology as “unscientific” in the 1920s, Russian cosmism and Eurasianism led an esoteric underground existence during the Soviet period and re-emerged during perestroika, seeking not only to reclaim their “scientific” status but also to potentially fill the perplexing vacuum left by the ensuing demise of Soviet state ideology.*

Keywords: State Ideology, Cosmism, Eurasianism, Russia, Kalmykia

## **State Ideology, Science, and Pseudoscience in Russia**

Russia is a country defined by the legacy of its past. While this can be said of any society, Russia's pioneering experiment with state ideology during the Soviet period and its intellectual movements of cosmism and Eurasianism are unique. This paper aims to summarize my research on these topics and describe my fieldwork in the Republic of Kalmykia, in southwest Russia, which provides a local perspective from which I approach broader Russian issues.

Despite their seeming incompatibility and differences, these three embodiments of "science," or intellectual movements, not only emerged at the same time (the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th) but are also products of the same wider Russian tradition of cosmo-philosophical and historiographical movements aimed at transforming the world. Rooted in the Slavophile philosophy of the 19th century, this tradition has several distinctive features. First, it combines national distinctiveness with universalist claims about the global destiny of the Russian nation. According to this view, Russia is a keeper of universal wisdom, blending the best achievements of Europe and Asia. Second, this tradition is eclectic in the sense that it represents a mixture of ideas derived from various sciences, pseudosciences, religions, and occultism. This tradition has been closely connected with specifically Russian history, yet it has also striven to encompass global history. Third, this tradition has a cosmic dimension. Not only human society but the Earth itself is considered too small to realize the great visions of Russian prophets—hence space must be colonized, and a multiplicity of worlds and dimensions must be conquered.

Since their birth from this tradition, these three movements—Soviet state ideology, Russian cosmism, and Eurasianism—never co-existed peacefully for long. Suppressed by the Soviet state and its ideology as "unscientific" in the 1920s, Russian cosmism and Eurasianism led an esoteric underground existence during the Soviet period and re-emerged in the dying years of the Soviet Union, seeking not only to reclaim their status but also to potentially fill the perplexing vacuum left by the demise of Soviet state ideology. By describing the entangled stories of state ideology, science, and pseudoscience, this paper outlines the past 100 or so years of Russian history. It also relates the post-Soviet search for a new state ideology (or as some Russians put it, new "National Idea") at the federal and regional levels, based on the Kremlin's projects and the case of the ethnic Republic of Kalmykia.<sup>1</sup>

### **Kalmykia**

Kalmykia is a small place roughly the size of South Dakota. Situated in the lower Volga region and north of the Caucasus Mountains, it extends along almost 100 km of Caspian Sea coast at its eastern extremity. Kalmykia's population is less than 300,000, more than half of whom are ethnic Kalmyks, a people of Oirat-Mongol origin.<sup>2</sup> Despite a belief reiterated in Western journalism and social media, the Kalmyks did not descend from the Golden Horde in Russia (1241–1502), although some of their ancestors did serve the Mongol Empire in Russia, China, Persia, and elsewhere. The ancestors of the Kalmyks came to their present homeland in the 1630s

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the topics of ideology, science, and pseudoscience, see Baasanjav Terbish, *State Ideology, Science and Pseudoscience in Russia: Between the Cosmos and the Earth* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> The Oirats are a Mongolic group whose historical homeland today corresponds to Western Mongolia. Beginning in the early 13th century, the Oirats were intertwined with Chingis Khan's lineage, serving the Mongol Empire. In 1368, the Mongol Empire retreated from China to its ancestral land north of the Great Wall of China, where the tribes split into two large warring factions: the Oirats in the west and the Mongols in the east.

from Zungaria (present-day Western Mongolia and Xinjiang, China). The Kalmyks are also the only Buddhist group with a centuries-long history in Europe and one of the three Buddhist peoples of the Russian Federation, the others being the Buryats and the Tuvans in Siberia. Apart from their distinct culture that has developed in isolation from other Mongol groups for over four centuries, the Kalmyks are known for having made the last long-distance nomadic migration in world history: in 1771 the majority of the Kalmyks set off on a perilous 3,300 km-long journey back to Zungaria during which an estimated 100,000 perished along the way.

Until the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Kalmyks who remained in Russia had been predominantly nomadic and the Kalmyk Steppe was used as a cattle-breeding periphery of the Russian Empire. During the Soviet period, they underwent a series of tremendous changes such as Russification, national unification, secularization, collectivization, and other shifts that left a deep imprint on their social organization and identity. From 1943 to 1956, the entire population was deported under Stalin to Siberia on charges of betraying the Soviet motherland during World War II, only to be pardoned and returned to their native land by Khrushchev following Stalin's death.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991 it was decided to create the post of president in Kalmykia, but owing to scandals the election was postponed. During the next attempt in 1993, the main struggle broke out between General Valery Ochirov, a hero of the Afghanistan War, and Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, a young self-made millionaire who promised to turn impoverished Kalmykia into a "second Kuwait." Ilyumzhinov won the election. During the Yeltsin era (1991–1999), Kalmykia, like other subject territories of the Russian Federation, enjoyed unprecedented freedom in both domestic and foreign affairs, and underwent significant political and social changes and distress. Among the first initiatives carried out by Ilyumzhinov were the dismantling of the local soviets, the proclamation of a new "economic dictatorship," and control of the media. Around 1994, Ilyumzhinov established an offshore zone in Kalmykia,<sup>3</sup> which is said to have brought him substantial income. In a few years, with the National Bank of Kalmykia and the entire economy under his firm control, Ilyumzhinov was acting more like the CEO of a company rather than the president of a republic.<sup>4</sup>

Another significant development that Ilyumzhinov presided over was the revival and spread of both traditional and nontraditional religious movements, among which Buddhism benefitted the most. His position as president of the International Chess Organization (FIDE), which he held until 2018,<sup>5</sup> gave him access to the international press and more business opportunities. During his time in power, he captured the attention of both the Russian and foreign press with his self-promotion, colorful personality, and controversial meetings with troubled Middle Eastern dictators

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3 Having attracted thousands of Russian firms that sought to evade taxes, the Kalmyk offshore zone was closed in or around 2002 at the "request" of the Kremlin. According to my informants close to Ilyumzhinov, Putin told Ilyumzhinov to close the offshore zone. This was done orally, without issuing written orders and the like.

4 According to the 1993 constitution, the Russian Federation consists of 89 constituent units, also known as "subject territories," including republics, krais, oblasts, cities of federal importance, autonomous oblasts and autonomous okrugs. Under President Boris Yeltsin, all republics of the Russian Federation, including Kalmykia, held elections to elect republican presidents. In 2004 Putin abolished the local institutions of the presidency along with republican presidential elections in all territories of Russia. Leaders of the republics, according to the new law, were degraded from "presidents" to "heads of republics" (*glava respublik*) who had to be appointed by the Kremlin.

5 "FIDE's Ethics Commission Suspends Ilyumzhinov as Its President." *Tass.com*, Tass Russian News Agency, 13 July 2018, <https://tass.com/sport/1012990>.

including Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, and Bashar al-Assad. Ilyumzhinov is also a self-professed UFO abductee with a taste for eccentric projects.<sup>6</sup>

In 2010 Ilyumzhinov had to resign not because of his cosmic mismanagement of Kalmykia but because of a new law signed by President Dmitriy Medvedev imposing term limits on regional leaders.<sup>7</sup> Aleksey Orlov, a Kalmyk who had been Ilyumzhinov's representative in Moscow, was appointed head of Kalmykia, a post which he held until March 2019, when he was replaced by Batu Khasikov, a master of martial arts and former policeman.<sup>8</sup> Despite Khasikov's pledge to kick-start Kalmykia's revival and bring order to its finances, no visible improvements have taken place, and the republic remains to this day an underdeveloped periphery with high levels of corruption, unemployment, and economic criminality.

I have studied Kalmykia since 2009, first as part of my graduate coursework at university in England. From 2014 to 2019, I worked on an anthropological project based at Cambridge University aimed at video-documenting the endangered culture of the Kalmyks, generating more than 2,500 videos of interviews, rituals, and cultural activities.<sup>9</sup> I traveled to Russia almost every year until 2020, observing changes in Kalmykia's situation and talking to people. Outside Kalmykia, I also interviewed Kalmyk diasporas in cities such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg and in Astrakhan Oblast, which allowed me to get to know local Russians and to better understand the situation in Russia.

### **Three Embodiments of “Science” in Russia**

Despite harboring pseudoscientific and mystical ideas specific to Russia, all three movements under consideration—Soviet state ideology, Russian cosmism, and Eurasianism—have been propagated by their followers as “universal sciences,” and all three have vied for scientific supremacy and universal acceptance.

To understand why these movements have been presented as “sciences” by their followers, one must first look at the Russian concept of science around the beginning of 20th century. The Russian word for science is *nauka*, which derives from the word *uk*, meaning “teaching, instruction.” Its derivatives are the verb *uchit'*, which can be translated into English as both “to teach” and “to learn,” and the noun *uchennyi*, meaning “scholar” or “an intelligent and experienced person.” In contrast with the modern Western understanding of science as “knowledge acquired by study,” *nauka* denotes pre-existing, natural knowledge that people can either teach others, or learn from others or from one's own life experience. That is, to do *nauka* one does not need to be a scientist in the Western understanding of the term but can be anyone deemed “smart and experienced,” such as peasant elders, priests, or particularly adept horse thieves. Another popular meaning of *nauka* is “organized knowledge,” which is close to the Western definition of science. Having several overlapping meanings, *nauka*

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6 Tom Parfitt, “King of Kalmykia,” *Guardian*, September 21, 2006, Europe, World, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/21/russia.chess>.

7 Helge Blakkisrud, “Medvedev's New Governors.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 3 (May 2011): 367–395, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2011.557531>.

8 Edward C. Holland, “Leadership Change and Protests in Russia's Kalmykia: Moscow's Corruptive Meddling and Its Discontents,” *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* no. 628 (December 2, 2019): 1–5, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/leadership-change-and-protests-in-russia-s-kalmykia-moscow-s-corruptive-meddling-and-its-discontents/>.

9 Deposited at Cambridge University's Apollo Repository, the video collections can be accessed at: <https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/253889>.

is far broader than “science,” with the implication that it allows any authoritative teaching, dogma, or pseudoscience to be presented as *nauchnyi* “scientific.”

In light of this definition, it becomes clearer why these three movements were proclaimed as “sciences.” Soviet ideology was trumpeted by its followers as a *scientific endeavor* for a revolutionary transformation of society to usher in scientific communism, the final stage of social evolution. Russian cosmism was revealed by its adherents as a *science* of truth about the Universe, aimed at engineering an immortal human race and bringing about ultimate cosmic order and peace. Based on geographical determinism and seeing Russia as a unique “landlocked civilization,” Eurasianism was popularized by its proponents as a new kind of *meta-science* about the terrestrial totality of Russia-Eurasia. By analyzing these three embodiments of “science,” one can get a sense of what constitutes “science” or a “scientific system” in Russia and seek to unpack the Russian/Soviet notion of state ideology and reveal its underlying links to pseudoscience and the occult.

### **State Ideology**

Ideology has been understood differently by various groups in different societies at different times. Since the term *ideology* was first coined by Antoine Destutt de Tracy in his work *Éléments d'idéologie* (1817–1818), its meaning has undergone a dramatic change and bewildering proliferation. If ideology originally meant the scientific study of human ideas, it soon came to denote systems of ideas themselves. With the contributions of scholars such as the Baron d'Holbach, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Mannheim, and Karl Marx, the term rapidly developed other subtle abstract meanings, such as a teaching, a belief, a philosophy, a practice, a critique of ideas, and so on. Today, as Terry Eagleton points out, ideology has a number of meanings, not all of which are compatible with each other. In *Ideology: An Introduction* (2007) Eagleton gives 16 different definitions of the term that are currently in circulation in the West alone.<sup>10</sup> Eagleton's study of Western traditions opens up the possibility that ideology may be understood even more differently in other parts of the world. This is the case in Russia. What this means is that a Russian person who hears the word *ideologiya* may think of something different from what Westerners may think of when they hear the word.

Unlike in Western democracies, in Russia ideology has historically been synonymous with state ideology, and as such it has a single definition approved by the state. Individual philosophers, scholars, or intellectuals cannot come up with their own definitions, which can be construed by the state as a challenge to its monopoly. This was especially the case in the Soviet period. Ideology in Russia also embodies the highest form of the political, for it is not supposed to emerge from the masses, but must be held within the purview of a tiny minority of political elites and experts. The Russian concept of *ideologiya* is often misunderstood in the West because it conveys meanings that are not necessarily present in Western definitions of the term. In the Soviet Union or Russia, ideology has in general been understood as a positive thing that serves two essential functions. Domestically, it is believed to be indispensable for national unity and the orderly running of society, and thus is both seen and practiced differently from how people in the West perceive ideology. Internationally, a state ideology is supposed to be planetary in scope and inspire those nations that seek ways of development that differ from Western models. As an overarching system of ideas and ideals that guides both domestic and foreign policy, a state ideology is also a belief system that defines the meaning of people's lives and explains their country's

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10 Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007), 28–31.

place in the world. That said, ideology is not supposed to be a set of ideas invented by political elites, or any humans for that matter, but should reflect the immutable eternal truth of nature and the Universe itself. The role of political elites is to seek out and translate this truth for the masses.

The Universal Truth can be correctly understood in its totality and analyzed only through “scientific” methods. In the Soviet Union, this role befell the guardians of Soviet state ideology, or Marxism-Leninism. Presented as a comprehensive scientific doctrine, Soviet ideology consisted of three main parts (philosophy, political economy, and theory of scientific socialism) that were supposed to be applicable to all scholarly disciplines, from the sciences to the humanities, along with politics and economics. In short, Soviet ideology was presented by the Communist Party as a “universal science” capable of providing a unified explanation of everything. Despite not living up to its promise and describing the world through the distorted lens of a bourgeois vs. proletarian dichotomy, Soviet ideology persisted more or less unscathed throughout the Soviet period.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, did not change people’s attitudes toward the importance of living in an ideologized society. Following the demise of the Soviet system, it was expected that *Homo sovieticus* would similarly disappear, or at least evolve into a more democratic person by shedding his instinctive obedience to the state and abandoning fear, powerlessness, and the dogmatic need for a state ideology. Although the immediate post-Soviet experience of the 1990s generated renewed hope and new visions of the future, people clung to their old habit of needing state protection and worshipping the state, while trying to adjust their behavior to new realities as they had always done. As the idea that Russia has to be united by a strong state employing a “set of unifying principles” remained largely intact in the political imagination of the majority of the population, it is no wonder that President Boris Yeltsin set up a special team in 1996 to create a “National Idea” (reminiscent of a state ideology) for Russia. Yeltsin’s attempt, however, did not produce the anticipated outcome, and he soon had to abandon his ideological project.<sup>11</sup>

While the Kremlin initiated unsuccessfully the search for a National Idea, in some rural parts such as Kalmykia discussions regarding the need for a new state ideology were independently initiated in the early post-Soviet days by various high-ranking bureaucrats and individuals who saw themselves as belonging to intellectual elites. For them, the ideological vacuum was problematic and dangerous precisely because it indicated the absence of collective values or morality, as well as the state’s weakness. The fact that Kalmyk intellectuals proposed various all-encompassing ideologies illustrates that the death of Soviet ideology did not result in state ideology becoming obsolete, but sparked a remarkable resurgence of ideological aspirations that both competed with and complemented various nationalist, religious, and developmental visions in Kalmykia.

While these ideological proposals did not materialize in their original forms, Kalmykia’s president weighed in and offered his own ideology. Emboldened by Yeltsin’s “take as much sovereignty as you can swallow” approach to local leaders and encouraged by Yeltsin’s search for a new National Idea, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov propounded a new Kalmyk-centric state ideology that reflected his vision of a new cosmic order not only for Kalmykia but for Russia as a whole. For his ideology, Ilyumzhinov proposed to revive not discredited scientific atheism but to use

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<sup>11</sup> Kathleen E. Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics & Memory during the Yeltsin Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 148–64.

spirituality and “new scientific systems,” which he found in the pseudoscientific movements of Russian cosmism and Eurasianism that had emerged from the Soviet esoteric underground during perestroika. Ilyumzhinov’s ideological project poses a question: Why did he propose a universalistic ideology instead of a more particularistic one based on ethno-nationalism, as was the case in many national republics in the 1990s including Tatarstan, Chechnya, and others? To answer this question, we need to look briefly at Kalmykia’s Soviet experience of nation-building and historiography.

As mentioned, the ancestors of the Kalmyks (several tribal confederations of Oirat-Mongol background including the Torghuts, the Derbets, the Khoshuds, and the Zungars) settled in what is today Kalmykia beginning in the 1630s. For various historical reasons, these tribal confederations never united into a single people until the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, when they underwent ethnic unification, becoming a single people (*narod*) with one historical outlook and set of ancestors and heroes at the expense of tribal histories, ancestors, and identities. The forced removal of the entire Kalmyk population to Siberia from 1943 to 1956 under Stalin was a turning point. Deprived of their citizenship rights and subject to institutionalized humiliation and abuse, the Kalmyks were scattered in small numbers all over Siberia and Central Asia.<sup>12</sup> There they were forced to conceal their ethnic identity and ethnic markers (clothing, holidays, rituals, beliefs, and language). Following Khrushchev’s pardon of them, the Kalmyks returned from exile not only bilingual, tamed, and physically deteriorated, but eager to reconnect with each other and—perhaps not surprisingly—to adjust to the ideals of the Soviet regime by accepting Soviet views uncritically.

Partly due to Kalmykia’s small population (which made it easy to control and surveil them effectively), and to Kalmyk eagerness to readjust, post-exile Kalmykia never generated its own hidden ethno-nationalism, nor did it nurture anti-regime subcultures, which was the case among other exiled groups such as the Chechens. During the post-exile readjustment period, a success if seen from a Soviet perspective, the history of the Kalmyk people was rewritten on the initiative of Kalmyk historians themselves (though not without the help of Russian advisors) in terms of *voluntarily* joining Russia and evincing eternal loyalty to the common motherland and the Communist Party. On the eve of perestroika, most Kalmyks spoke only Russian, were ignorant of their traditional culture, and saw themselves as Soviet citizens. The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, did not bring conflict to the republic based on ethnic difference (that is, Kalmyk versus Russian), nor unleashed ethno-nationalism, which can be attributed to the success of both the Soviet ethno-project and the Soviet interpretation of Kalmyk history. Unchallenged in terms of its foundational ideas, today the official history remains strongly pro-Russian, and many, if not most, Kalmyks proudly see themselves as Russian patriots.

Given these circumstances, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov’s choice of a universalistic ideology based on all-Russian ideas and movements, albeit mystical in orientation, is unsurprising. Ilyumzhinov’s main collaborator, Kalmykia’s State Secretary for Ideology Alexei Nuskhaev, was also a Russian patriot, as were the Russian and Kalmyk members of the Eurasian Academy of Life in Elista, the regional capital city, who advised Kalmykia’s leaders on the new state ideology. Ilyumzhinov’s ideological experiment, however, proved unsuccessful.

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<sup>12</sup> Following the banishment of the Kalmyks to Siberia in 1943, many individuals were later further removed to other places. By 1948, Kalmyks had been scattered across 15 *oblasti* and *kraya* in Siberia and the Russian Far East, 13 *oblasti* in Kazakhstan, as well as in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.



While more than three decades have passed since the collapse of state socialism and the repudiation of Soviet ideology, this positive attitude towards a state-sponsored ideology is still prevalent, and many people wish their country had a state ideology akin to the centralized Soviet model. One of the propositions of this paper is, therefore, to move away from the conventional Western understanding of ideology as something negative and artificial, if one is to understand contemporary Russia, because ideology in that country is perceived as something that is natural, brings order, offers guidance for the future, and gives meaning to people's lives. If asked about how order and prosperity should be brought about, today many people in Kalmykia—who still associate ideology with positive things but may see both historical Marxism-Leninism and more recently Ilyumzhinov's ideology as experiments gone wrong—would reply that they need “a better state ideology.” This is the case not only among many middle-aged and older people in Kalmykia, but also among their compatriots in other parts of Russia, who remember the Soviet Union and feel unhappy about the current situation in their country, which they see as being plagued by widening inequality, disorder, and precariousness of life.

### **Russian Cosmism**

Like Soviet ideology, Russian cosmism was born during a period when idealistic belief in the omnipotence of science spread rapidly among writers, philosophers, political elites, and the general public. This belief played out against a backdrop of social unrest that swept across Russia including three revolutions (one in 1905 and two in 1917) that opened up new horizons (at least for the time being) and changed Russian society beyond all recognition, undermining centuries-old dogmas, conventions, knowledge, and values. It was in this transformative environment that Russian cosmism emerged to deal with a host of scientific-philosophical questions, among which those concerning the cosmos and the fate of technologically advancing humankind were of central importance. Guided by their universal aspirations, what the early cosmists did was to try to make sense of a new emerging reality and systematize major scientific discoveries—from the tiniest particles such as atoms to the largest structures such as galaxies and everything between—and to offer a new unifying story. In this sense, Russian cosmism was similar to Soviet ideology, which was presented by the Communist Party as a universal science capable of providing a unified explanation of everything.

According to cosmism's view, the Universe consists of energy and data flows, and humans are intimately connected not only with their planet but with the endless expanse of the Universe teeming with countless extraterrestrial civilizations through myriad cosmic energies and waves. These energies and waves are believed to transfer not only heat but many other miraculous qualities such as collective intelligence, memories, wisdom, healing powers, and even sensibilities. Some even believe the Universe to be a gigantic living organism. Despite its “scientific” aspirations, cosmism is not a science, as the term is generally understood in the West, for not only does it not utilize experimental methodology involving control groups, equipment, and the like, but its underlying belief in the omnipotence of science and technology is rooted in the idea of the magic power of occult knowledge. The cosmist idea of the realization of immortality and the revival of the dead with the help of science, for example, has a long occult and Gnostic heritage in which death is seen as a technical problem, aside from the fact that cosmist conceptions contain theosophical and panpsychic influences.



While many cosmists do not believe in a god or other supernatural beings, some who do belong to cosmism's Fëdorovian (followers of Fëdorov) quasi-spiritual-quasi-technological branch that focuses, in the spirit of "science," on physical phenomena, energies, and human technology at the expense of God. Similar to deism, this spiritual branch sees God as a passive power, which does not intervene in the Universe, having relegated his active duties to humans with their powerful technology. By appointing itself the "perfecter of the Universe"<sup>13</sup> and endowing itself with powers of creation and destruction, humanity—the cosmic duty of which is to pursue scientific progress by eradicating disease, freeing itself from biological limitations, and attaining immortality—takes up the role ascribed in folk cosmologies to gods. This cosmic endeavor, however, has to be managed by strong leaders—a Russian autocrat, a team of leading [Russian] scientists, or, according to some cosmists, the Russian God-man himself—a view consonant with Russia's traditional political culture. By worshipping humanity and its growing technology (rather than the biblical God), cosmism is essentially a humanistic movement in the age of modernity.

In the early decades of the Soviet Union when the Bolsheviks were openly experimenting with all sorts of ideas—from free love to Lenin's New Economic Policy (which allowed private enterprise) to avant-garde art to a scientized occult—it is not difficult to imagine that cosmism's activist approach to all life's problems and its way of thinking, full of futurism, idealism, energy, and a metaphysics of technology, offered a source of inspiration to early Soviet literature, philosophy, art, science, and politics. Not only did many great Russian poets exhibit, to one degree or another, cosmist concerns in their works, but some Bolshevik leaders were cosmists themselves, including Alexandr Bogdanov (an early political rival of Lenin's), Anatoly Lunacharsky (people's commissar for education), Leonid Krasin (Soviet minister for trade), and others. This honeymoon period in cosmist-Bolshevik relations, however, began to wane during Stalin's "great turn" of 1929 as scientific disciplines quickly consolidated under the umbrella of Soviet state ideology, and the pseudoscientific side of cosmism was suppressed by the state (although some of the movement's less controversial ideas were quietly incorporated into Soviet culture).

Purged for most of the Soviet period, cosmism as a body of ideas, however, survived in the shadows in many guises: in the secretive healing practices of psychics who used cosmic and telepathic energies; in stories about UFO sightings; in underground circles in which the paranormal was discussed and practiced; in *samizdat*<sup>14</sup> manuscripts; in futuristic works of art; and in the names of the movement's pioneers, including Nikolay Fëdorov (1829–1903), Konstantin Tsiolkovskii (1857–1935), and others, who happened to be the leading philosophers of the Soviet space program. The relationship between Russian cosmism and the mainstream scientific community, and the Soviet state in particular, remained controversial. As a movement labeled "non-scientific," cosmism's very existence, albeit in the Soviet underground, shaped the contours of what "science" or Soviet ideology was. Furthermore, in the Soviet Union, a society notorious for secrecy and suppression in which people sought unsanctioned explanations (that is, conspiracy theories about what was going on inside their country and beyond), cosmism served an important societal role by helping sustain a belief among the population in the hidden, the unknown, and the paranormal.

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Hagemester, "Russian Cosmism in the 1920s and Today," in *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 185–186.

<sup>14</sup> *Samizdat* refers to the underground copying and distribution of literature banned by the state.

Like other suppressed movements, cosmism emerged from the underground only during Mikhail Gorbachev's period of perestroika and glasnost. Not only did cosmism openly proliferate at the grassroots level, but the movement's activist, universalist, and humanist ideals were incorporated at the highest political level in Gorbachev's policy of "new thinking."<sup>15</sup> Politburo members from Mikhail Gorbachev to Aleksandr Yakovlev to Eduard Shevardnadze, as well as other high-ranking Party members, stressed the fundamental importance of the unity of the world and universal values in their speeches, announcements, and writings, thus further popularizing cosmism. Gorbachev, for example, called for the "formation of an integrated universal consciousness," something he described as "a form of spiritual communication and rebirth for mankind."<sup>16</sup> Dubbed the "godfather of glasnost" and the intellectual force behind Gorbachev's reform program, Yakovlev asserted by using cosmist rhetoric that "the world is becoming ever more aware of itself as a single organism."<sup>17</sup> Pointing out that "the biosphere recognizes no division into blocs, alliances, or systems," Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze contended that all nations "share a place where individual national efforts unite into a single energy field."<sup>18</sup> Anatoliy Adamishin, the Soviet deputy foreign minister, supported his superior by drawing attention to the fact that "physicists have long realized the unity not only of the world but of the entire Universe. It is now politicians' turn."<sup>19</sup>

It was in this environment that the Experimental Creative Center was established in 1990 in Moscow under the patronage of the Politburo member Yuri Prokofyev, which was led by Sergey Kurginyan, a former theater director and an admirer of the cosmist movement. The Center's task, staffed with hundreds of researchers, was to write a post-perestroika program for the ideological and spiritual renewal of the Soviet Union. Kurginyan proposed a "cosmic philosophical religious social idea" based on Russian cosmism, communism, nationalism, and Christian theology.<sup>20</sup>

The cosmism-inspired call for universal unity and for the Soviet Union's ideological resuscitation was accompanied by another phenomenon: mass sightings of UFOs in many parts of the Soviet Union that were duly reported by the liberalized press. While central news agencies and newspapers disseminated the news of UFO sighting and landings near military bases, nuclear power plants, and other strategic locations, sightings in small and not very strategically important localities were also reported in increasing numbers in many local newspapers. One such locality was Kalmykia. Thus, in the article, "Did the Aliens Visit Us?" published in *Izvestiia Kalmykii* ("Kalmyk News") on June 7, 1995, the journalists wrote:

In response to our article "In the Night Sky Above Elista" published on June 2, all of a sudden our newspaper office was flooded with telephone calls from the readers. In order to process all the incoming information, our workers had to wait at the phone machine in turns. Being in a hurry to share what they saw, people phoned us not only from Elista but also from the remotest corners of Kalmykia. And this in spite of the high cost of intercity calls! Thank you, dear friends! From all the stories

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15 Steven Kull, *Burying Lenin: The Revolution in Soviet Ideology and Foreign Policy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992), 28.

16 Kull, *Burying Lenin*, 27.

17 Kull, *Burying Lenin*, 27–28.

18 Kull, *Burying Lenin*, 27.

19 Kull, *Burying Lenin*, 25–28.

20 S. E. Kurginyan et al., *Postperestroika* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1990).

we have recorded so far, we tried to select the most, in our view, interesting and colorful ones.<sup>21</sup>

The article published 25 eyewitness accounts of UFOs, indicating the enormous popularity of this topic in Kalmykia. This mass excitement went hand in hand with the reported abductions of Kalmyk citizens by space aliens, among whom the most high-profile victim was Kalmykia's President Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, who claimed to have been abducted in September 1997 while on a business trip in Moscow.

The establishment of the Eurasian Academy of Life in Elista in 1990 attests to the early popularization of cosmism in the region. Consisting of cosmists, Eurasianists, historians, philosophers, and psychics, the Academy's star member was Alexei Nuskhaev, a self-proclaimed alien contactee, who was hired in 1995 by President Ilyumzhinov as Kalmykia's state secretary for ideology. Another cosmist organization to emerge in Kalmykia was a discussion club called Aribut, founded by one Valery Dorzhinov, another self-confessed alien abductee who shot to fame thanks to colorful accounts of his intergalactic journeys that he published in the state-controlled newspaper *Khalmg Unn* ("Kalmyk Truth"). Dorzhinov also organized a series of exhibitions of his cosmic paintings, contributing to the proliferation of cosmism in Kalmykia. Other notable names are the famous Kalmyk artist Dmitry Sandzhiev, who paints cosmic works of art; Zoya Boschaeva, professor of economics at Kalmyk State University, who writes on solar-Earth theory;<sup>22</sup> and the architect Jangar Pyurveev, who has written several books on cosmism.<sup>23</sup>

Like many cosmists, these individuals claim to be connected to the cosmos from where they say they receive novel ideas, visions, and the truth about the Universe. Having foothold in the realm of the spiritual, Russian cosmism, which positions itself as a non-religion, nonetheless influences religious belief. In Kalmykia many folk healers who practice Buddhism mixed with folk beliefs use various energies, including "cosmic energy," which they claim to absorb from their environment or receive from Buddhist gods. Some even claim to receive this energy directly from the cosmos or extraterrestrial beings. The most prominent belong to a community called *Vozrozhdenie* ("Revival"), led by a charismatic folk healer named Galina Muzaeva, who appropriately describes her religion as *Kosmicheskii buddizm* ("Cosmic Buddhism"). Apart from healing the sick by means of traditional methods (such as reading Buddhist mantras, using herbs, and so on) the community, which consists of 16 "cosmic Buddhists," carries out cosmic projects in collaboration with extraterrestrial powers. Members of this community communicate with the cosmos and receive celestial maps, diagrams, and instructions on how to create "energy corridors" for UFOs to beam down cosmic rays. Once these spots have absorbed enough cosmic energy, Galina Muzaeva assures, they begin to radiate with power enough to turn the entire planet into an earthly paradise where diseases will be eradicated, corrupt nation states purged, and all religions and nations will become united in a cosmic union centered around Russia under the leadership of the spiritually powerful Kalmyks headed by Galina Muzaeva herself.<sup>24</sup> Due to the

21 "Did the Aliens Visit Us?" *Izvestiya Kalmykii*, June 7, 1995.

22 Zoya Boschaeva, *Upravlenie Ekonomicheskim Rostom* (Moscow: Ekonomika, 2004); Boschaeva, *Formula Ekonomicheskogo Rosta* (Moscow: Ekonomika, 2007).

23 Jangar Pyurveev, *Arkhitektura Mirozdaniya* (Moscow: Izd-vo PKTs Al'teks, 2006); Pyurveev, *Velikoe Sokrestie Kontinentov—Strategicheskaya Model' Kosmoplanetarnoy Integratsii Planety Zemlya v Noosfere* (Moscow: Sofi Print, 2014); Pyurveev et al., *Cosmoplanetarian Integration of Earth* (Moscow: Mirozdanie Ltd., 2009).

24 Baasanjav Terbish, "I Have My Own Spaceship: Folk Healer in Kalmykia, Russia," *Inner Asia* 20, no. 1 (April 2018): 132–158, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22105018-12340101>.

proliferation of popular cosmism, in Kalmykia, the populace generally takes cosmic topics seriously and many—including respectable scholars, politicians, journalists, and public figures—are more likely than not to believe in telepathy, cosmic energies, the transubstantiation of souls, and UFOs.

Today, Russian cosmism is propagated as *dukhovnaia nauka*, a “science of soul-searching and the truth,” purporting to address hitherto suppressed psychic, spiritual, and paranormal issues and anxieties from a global, cosmic perspective. Given the circumstances of the period when cosmism came about, the knowledge, explanations, and predictions of its founding fathers were bound to be as speculative as they were emotional. Russian cosmism emerged as a cultural-intellectual movement that propagated speculative ideas about the nature of humanity, its projected evolution, and its place in the Universe, and this trend continues to this day. Due to cosmism’s wealth of topics and predictions, today the Russian cosmist scene resembles more an ecosystem encompassing diverse and fluid groups and networks, including self-proclaimed cosmists, transhumanists, posthumanists, immortalists, futurologists, and Fëdorovians, whose beliefs overlap in some areas but contradict themselves in others.

Nevertheless, united by a common belief in the possibility of attaining immortality, many cosmist-minded individuals not only contend that their movement has great potential, but some even call for cosmism to be developed into a “universal ideology” of the future. It can be argued that the current popularity of cosmism, as strange as it may sound, was to some extent precipitated by Soviet ideology with its futurism, space exploration, and ethno-engineering projects extending into the future. Promoted as an original product of the Russian mind (hence the label “Russian cosmism,” as opposed to the “Western” one), cosmism also has the capacity to trigger strong nationalistic feelings and sentiments. Staunchly nationalist, many cosmists of different ethnicities in Russia indeed share a conspiratorial mindset and are openly anti-Western.

### **Eurasianism**

Another ambitious, all-embracing, collectivist movement that has arisen from the ashes of Soviet science and ideology is Eurasianism. Purporting to be a “science,” it offers a systematized explanation of the uniqueness and fate of the large territory that coincides with the borders of the former Russian Empire and its successor, the Soviet Union. Whereas during the Soviet period this political-geographical union, inhabited by myriad sedentary and nomadic peoples, was legitimized by the Marxist-Leninist theory of evolutionary merger by stages, today its most promising substitute is Eurasianism, which postulates not social evolution and merger, but the idea of fixed, primordial civilizational clusters (Eurasian, Atlanticist, Chinese, and other clusters) that exist in opposition to one another.

Eurasianism was first proposed by Russian émigrés in Sofia, Bulgaria, in the 1920s. The proponents of this theory who fled Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution (including Prince Nikolay Troubetskoy, the minor aristocrat Pëtr Savitskii, the historian Georgii Vernadskii, the Kalmyk doctor Erenzhen Khara-Davan, and

others)<sup>25</sup> argued that Russian civilization does not belong to the European category, but is a unique civilization in its own right. It is neither European nor Asian but something in between: Eurasian. By rejecting European values, the founding fathers of the movement (referred to as “classical Eurasianists”) also rejected “atomistic” European scholarship and attempted to explain Russia-Eurasia by constructing a new meta-science that would render it possible to understand the world in its totality.<sup>26</sup>

This desire to create an overarching system of ideas resembles the early cosmist project of unifying all sciences and recounting the story of life from a cosmic perspective. But unlike cosmism, Eurasianism’s analytical angle was embedded in terrestrial geography, or more precisely in its interpretation of terrestrial geography, laced with Europhobia. In comparison with human-centric cosmism, Eurasianism is nature-centric in that nature is seen as the source of all truth. While aiming to explain the Earth in its totality, Eurasianists focused attention on Russia-Eurasia and sought to demonstrate the existence of a meta-science peculiar to Eurasia, which they saw as a territory embodying “a structural totality, explicable through its own internal elements and not in terms of its interaction with the outside.”<sup>27</sup> Fascinated by the laws and regularities of nature, the founding fathers of Eurasianism proposed arguments that were metaphysical, conspiratorial, and verged on geographical determinism. In their metaphysical conception of geography, Eurasia was a “unique civilization,” a “closed circle,” and a “living organism”<sup>28</sup> that shaped human collectives, their culture, psychology, history, and politics.

Owing to this geographical closure, Eurasia, which encompassed myriad peoples with different languages, cultures, and histories, was historically predestined by nature itself to form a single civilization, a single state unit in opposition to Europe. In this light, the Bolshevik Revolution was reimagined as Russia’s natural reaction to rapid Westernization, and the ensuing bloody civil war was seen as a divine force to cleanse Russia-Eurasia of its cultural corruption and bring its inner vitality and essence to the fore. Based on this insight, the Eurasianists attempted to predict Russia-Eurasia’s future. Opposed to militant atheism and Bolshevik ideas, they came to believe that soon nature, with its immutable laws, would correct itself and the Bolshevik power would organically evolve into a new national, Orthodox-Christian government.<sup>29</sup>

However, this expectation never materialized, and the Soviet secret police, which had orchestrated the Red Terror during the Russian Civil War, successfully eradicated the Eurasianist movement. The Soviet government’s eradication of the movement had some irony to it, in that many Soviet policies informed by their own state ideology

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25 Mark Bassin, Sergei Glebov, and Marlene Laruelle, eds., *Between Europe & Asia: The Origins, Theories, and Legacies of Russian Eurasianism* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015); Mark Bassin and Pozo Gonzalo, eds., *The Politics of Eurasianism: Identity, Popular Culture and Russia’s Foreign Policy* (London [Shouldn’t this be Lanham, Maryland?]: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008).

26 Mark Bassin, Sergei Glebov, and Marlene Laruelle, “Introduction: What Was Eurasianism and Who Made It?,” in *Between Europe & Asia: The Origins, Theories, and Legacies of Russian Eurasianism*, edited by Mark Bassin, Sergei Glebov, and Marlene Laruelle, (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 9.

27 Marlene Laruelle, “Conceiving the Territory: Eurasianism as a Geographical Identity,” in *Between Europe & Asia: The Origins, Theories, and Legacies of Russian Eurasianism*, ed. Mark Bassin, Sergei Glebov, and Marlene Laruelle (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 69.

28 Pëtr Savitsky, “Geograficheskiy obzor Rossii-Evrazii,” in *Rossiia: Osobyi Geograficheskiy Mir*, (Prague, unknown publisher, 1927), 29, 57.

29 Bassin, Glebov, and Laruelle, *Between Europe & Asia*, 7–9.

were not dissimilar to those held by Eurasianists. The Soviet state was staunchly anti-Western, conspiratorial, totalitarian, promoted narratives of the Soviet Union's exceptionalism, and unleashed Russocentrism by upholding the Russian people as "the first among equals" and the "vanguard nation" in Soviet society. Mirroring Eurasianist values, the cultures of non-Russian peoples in the Soviet Union were also taught to be historically tied to that of the Russians.

Despite being eradicated as an organized movement, Eurasianism as a theory of geographical determinism was revived in the Soviet Union thanks to the dissident historian Lev Gumilëv (1912–1992). Like his predecessors, he saw the Soviet Union, successor to the Russian Empire, as neither a European nor an Asian country, but a unique Eurasian civilization. In so doing, he de-emphasized Russia's links to European culture and portrayed European peoples as historical foes of Russia. His contribution to Eurasianism was his theory of ethnogenesis, or "birth of ethnos," which hinges on the concept of *passionarnost'* ("passionarity"). Passionarity refers to a process whereby leaders absorb energy from the environment and use this energy in organizing and managing their compatriots, setting up new standards of behavior, and in this way bring about a new ethnos. In his view, history does not develop in a linear advance, but consists of cycles when passionarity gives birth to new ethnos and civilizations, and ultimately when the impulse is depleted the ethnos dies out, giving way to the next. He did not stop there. Influenced by cosmists, he established the origin of passionarity in cosmic rays which, he argued, are absorbed by a landscape. In other words, cosmic energy from outer space ultimately shapes terrestrial human civilizations.

According to Gumilëv, the distribution of passionarity is not equal across the globe. The highest concentration of this energy is in the territory of the Soviet Union-Eurasia and the Middle East, with the implication that these territories contain the highest number of "passionaries." By contrast, Western Europe and the United States not only have a low level of passionarity, but are constantly losing this vital energy.<sup>30</sup> By anchoring anti-Western sentiments to Eurasia's landscape, he saw Cold War animosity between the Soviet Union and the West not as a fight between communism and capitalism, but as a fight that had deeper natural and even cosmic roots. What he did was to "energize" human history and trace the energy stored in the landscape, which brings about civilizational clusters, back to its cosmic origin. The role of leaders, or "passionaries," is to serve as a bridge between cosmic and social phenomena. Gumilëv established a new link between the cosmos and the Earth and instituted a new cult of leaders.

Suppressed by the state and despised by the Soviet scientific community, Gumilëv nonetheless achieved stratospheric fame during the perestroika era. With Soviet ideology by then in tatters and the whole society in search of alternative thinking while anxious about preserving the Soviet Union, his civilizational ideas and his theory of ethnogenesis gathered support from politicians, philosophers, and scholars from a wide political spectrum, ranging from liberals to conservatives to nationalists and imperialists. Not only did Eurasianism provide an alternative vision of ideology, but it also justified the existence of the multiethnic Soviet Union as a single political entity. The collapse of state socialism provided fertile soil for Eurasianism to transmogrify and branch out. His works were especially well received not only in some of the newly independent states of Central Asia including Kazakhstan and

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<sup>30</sup> Lev Gumilëv, *Ot Rusi do Rossii* (Moscow: Izd-vo Zakharov, 1993), 10–25; Gumilëv, *Etnogenezis i Biosfera Zemli* (Moscow: AST, 2005).

Kyrgyzstan, but in ethnic regions of Russia where local scholars, philosophers, and writers offered interpretations of Eurasianism which valorized indigenous peoples.

While Eurasianism swept across some ethnic minority regions within Russia, in Moscow, the seat of power, its popularization is closely linked to several individuals. One of them is Aleksandr Dugin (born 1962), a prominent Russian conspiracy theorist, far-right nationalist, occultist, and political analyst who founded the Eurasian Party in 2001, which later morphed into the international Eurasian Movement. An admirer of Nazi Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich, Heinrich Himmler's deputy,<sup>31</sup> Dugin's contribution has been to create a militarized and geopoliticized version of Eurasianism fit for post-Soviet conditions by combining Eurasianism with the *siloviki* outlook (denoting the intelligence services, the police, and the army) and fascism. Hitherto known only within the Russian far-right movement, thanks to his writings on Eurasianism laced with metaphysics, Dugin shot to fame among the general population owing to his book, *Foundations of Geopolitics* (1997), which became a textbook at military academies across Russia.

In *Foundations of Geopolitics*, which is presented as an academic work, Dugin reiterates Gumilëv's pseudoscientific position that the clash between the Soviet Union and the West was never a dispute between communism and capitalism, but one of a land-based Eurasian power against an array of Atlantic maritime powers. But unlike Gumilëv, Dugin, deeply influenced by his exposure to the military establishment (he wrote the book while teaching at the Frunze Military Academy in Moscow), expounds on the game of geopolitics which, according to him, is based on raw competition, conquests, alliances, covert operations, conspiracies, and spheres of influence. In the book, Dugin also argued that Western nations' notions, such as "democracy" and "human rights," are nothing more than window dressing and propaganda deployed to conceal their true intent, which is to encircle and destroy Russia. By preaching that Russia's post-perestroika humiliation was the direct result of Western conspiracies, the book's prescription for Russia's revival was to improve the country's defensive position by counteracting the conspiracy of "Atlanticism" led by the United States. The tactical plan was to put the Soviet Union back together as a new Russian-led Eurasian Empire, and push the Atlanticists back by using canny geopolitical alliances with regional powers, including Germany, Iran, and Japan. With regard to the concept of a Russo-German alliance, the book dictates that the two countries must divide Eastern Europe into spheres of influence and create a direct border with each other (reminiscent of the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact), which would shift Europe away from American and British influence and toward Russia. Russia-Eurasia must then simultaneously pursue proactive international politics by means of annexations and covert operations, including but not limited to: incorporating Georgia's South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions into Russia, annexing Ukraine, and spreading separatism and instability in the United States and Britain.

Some of these proposals put forward by Dugin in 1997 proved to be truly prophetic. The year 2008 saw the Russo-Georgian War over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In 2014, Putin annexed the Crimea from Ukraine and expressed his support for the self-determination of rebellious elements in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region. On February 24, 2022, Putin invaded the rest of Ukraine, intending to occupy the entire country. With regard to "Atlanticist" territories, there is a growing body of evidence implicating Russian-sponsored and Russia-based actors in meddling in Britain's Brexit referendum in 2016. Later that same year, the

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<sup>31</sup> Marlene Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist?: Unraveling Propaganda East and West* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 116.



United States was also rocked with allegations of Russian-led interference in the country's presidential election.

Having constantly evolved over the course of the century since its inception, today Eurasianism serves as an umbrella term that accommodates a variety of ideas. Like a Russian *matryoshka* doll that consists of wooden dolls of decreasing sizes placed one inside the other, Eurasianism encompasses civilizational, geographical-deterministic, geopolitical, anti-Western, nationalistic, militaristic, economic, ethno-psychological, imperial, and mystical ideas, which are all united by an overarching theme of a strong Russian state. Despite its esoteric origins and internal contradictions, as a civilizational and ethno-psychological doctrine celebrating Russia's uniqueness, Eurasianism has, under Putin, been appropriated by the Russian state and inaugurated as a "science" of culturology and historiography, lending it the legitimacy to be used not only in classrooms but also in wider political projects. Dreamt up by a group of homesick émigrés, as a political dogma Eurasianism has found its material incarnation in Russia's foreign policy concerning former Soviet territories. Following Kremlin-backed geopolitical and economic projects such as the Eurasian Economic Community (2000–2010) and the Eurasian Customs Union (2010–2014), today the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which came into effect in January 2015, has five members that are all former Soviet republics including Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia.

As a theory and philosophy of restoring and protecting the "Russian world" and "Eurasian identity," Eurasianism also presupposes flexible borders. At the inception of the EEU, President Putin stated that his goal was to enlarge the organization to all post-Soviet territories, excluding the three Baltic states (which are both NATO and EU members). As a former imperial center, Russia under Putin not only appointed itself as the protector of a common history, common ways of life, and the purity of common values, but also jealously guards its civilizational peripheries from alien penetration and contamination. The fact that both Georgia's and Ukraine's rapprochement with NATO elicited Russia's military intervention into these two post-Soviet countries, regarded by the Kremlin as Russia's backyard, should be understood in this context.

In Kalmykia, Eurasianism is as popular as in many other parts of Russia, although Kalmyks have embraced aspects of Eurasianism for reasons peculiar to their ethnic group. First, as a theory of geographic determinism, Eurasianism fits with Kalmyk folk cosmology, in which the worship of land, seen as an "animated" entity teeming with local spirits of nature that control human destiny, has an important function in people's lives. As such, Eurasianism not only helps Kalmyks understand themselves as an ethnic group, but also explains who their neighbors are. In believing that the Kalmyk Steppe instills obedience, patriotism, and tranquility in people living there, Kalmyks, for example, widely perceive local Russians as similar to Kalmyks in terms of mentality and values. Hence, many local Russians are seen by Kalmyks as "honorary Kalmyks." By contrast, Russians from other parts of the country are often met with a degree of suspicion due to the vast and varying geography of Russian dispersal that supposedly shapes diverse localized mentalities. Therefore, in Kalmykia today, popular explanations about the presumed bond between landscape and human character are as much folk-derived ideas as they are based on state-disseminated propaganda. Given a popular belief in regional mentalities on the one hand and in the uniqueness of Russia on the other, it is not hard to convince Kalmyks of the existence of a supra-national identity peculiar to Russia-Eurasia. Hence, it takes only a small leap of faith for them to support Moscow-centric projects, both

geopolitical and military, aimed at protecting Russia-Eurasia's spheres of influence and civilizational integrity. No wonder, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its recent full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, both propagated by the Kremlin-controlled media as measures aimed at protecting the motherland against a so-called illegitimate, NATO-imposed, Ukrainian Nazi government, have met with approval by many in Kalmykia.

Second, Eurasianism gives Kalmyks a new and dignified history and also offers them a conceptual tool to deal with the identity crisis that engulfed the Kalmyk ethnos following the demise of the Soviet system. When becoming *Homo sovieticus* ceased to be the aim, Eurasianism proved particularly attractive as a substitute, in that it presented an opportunity for Kalmyks to overcome the identity crisis by realigning the benchmarks of Kalmyk identity closer to Russian values yet again. The popular self-narrative among Kalmyks asserting that they are a unique, hybrid people of Asian origin integrated into the European cultural world and who serve as a bridge between Europe and Asia makes the Kalmyks an epitome of a Eurasian (or Euro-Asian) ethnos. Given the existence of such Eurasianist discourses focused on the "symbiotic" relations between Russia and the Kalmyk ethnos, today it is not rare to meet Kalmyks, especially among the younger generation, who say, with a sense of pride, that they are "people with Asian faces, Buddhist faith, and Russian soul." Celebrated by the Kalmyk government, not only did Gumilëv's books achieve great popularity, but the fact that the Kalmyk Dr. Khara-Davan was among the founding fathers of Eurasianism is a source of immense pride (Khara-Davan popularized the idea of Chingis Khan being the first emperor of the Eurasian Empire). In Elista a street was named after Gumilëv and a monument dedicated to Eurasianism was erected in 1996 in front of the Government House. The Eurasian Academy of Life in Elista, as mentioned, assisted President Kirsan Ilyumzhinov in writing his textbook on Kalmykia's state ideology.

## **Conclusion**

In the last century of the last millennium, Russian and Soviet philosophers and intellectuals proposed what they termed a "science" capable of transforming the world and turning Russia and the Soviet Union into a universal superpower. Defined differently from cosmic (Russian cosmist), social-evolutionary (Soviet state ideological), and terrestrial (Eurasianist) perspectives, each embodiment of this "super science," or new system of knowledge, was supposed to enable humans to overcome the chaos of the world and bring about universal order between the cosmos and the Earth. Despite their globally oriented appeal, all three embodiments of "science" promoted Russia's exceptionalism and uniqueness and contrasted Russia and the Soviet Union against the West. All three promoted a cult of personality around certain leaders.

In the new millennium, despite Soviet state ideology being repudiated following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the idea that a strong state should have an all-encompassing ideology remains intact among the population, especially among those who are middle-aged or belong to the older generation, who are the powerbrokers in today's Russia. Meanwhile, cosmism and Eurasianism are gaining in popularity. Since their inception, both cosmism and Eurasianism have gone through transformations and generated offshoots. Russian cosmism has developed methods of attaining various "levels of sensual reality" through such variants as biocosmism, energocosmism, anthropocosmism, astrocosmism, teocosmism, soficosmism, hierarchocosmism,

and sociocosmism,<sup>32</sup> and encompasses, as mentioned, diverse groups and networks, including cosmists, transhumanists, posthumanists, immortalists, futurologists, and Fëdorovians. While these various groups seeking to attain various “levels of sensual reality” may not be incompatible with each other, Russian cosmism as a whole is still a distinct movement promoting Russian exceptionalism. The same can be said of Eurasianism, which denounces liberal Western values. In this respect, they not only nourish each other’s impulses for authoritarian domination but intersect with the idea of Russia needing a powerful, centralized ideology that would render the country exceptional and superior.

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32 O. D. Kurakina, “Russkiy kosmizm i nookosmologicheskij vzglyad v budushchee,” *Sait ob Osnovakh Kosmicheskogo Miroponimaniya*, <http://cosmizm.ru/c4220-d-kurakina-russkij-kosmizm-i-nookosmologicheskij-vzglyady-budushhee/>.