

## RUSSIA IN CENTRAL ASIA: RETURN

Alexander KNIAZEV

*D.Sc. (Hist.),  
professor at the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University  
(Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan)*

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### Overview of the Past

In the 1990s Russia's position in Central Asia became significantly eroded, not so much for economic reasons, as some Russian politicians allege, but because of its grossly misinterpreted national interests.

It has become customary to associate the radical revision of Russia's Central Asian policy with Vladimir Putin's presidency. This is very true, but the events of 2000 were no more than the first steps toward fundamental changes.

In 2005, the sovereign democracy conception marked a turning point in Russia's foreign policy: the country finally placed its sovereignty above its foreign policy constants and began to slowly retreat from its previous devotion to the Western liberal-democratic principles.

Sovereignty, understood as a synonym for the country's political competitiveness, made great changes in Russia's approach to the CIS: it sided with Uzbekistan in its post-Andijan conflict with the West and began pouring much more energy into the SCO and several other projects. The situation that had taken shape by 2004-2005 in the Western vector of Russia's foreign policy and on its southern borders pushed the RF into Asian geopolitics. The U.S.-led military operation in Afghanistan allowed Russia to interfere more openly than before in the Central Asian political processes, which forced China to act accordingly. The Russian Federation could no longer ignore the new realities—the balance of power in the region of Russia's vital interests was on the verge of being upset.

### Transformation of Russia's Foreign Policy Paradigm

In view of the changed style of Russia's relations with the key international partners and the very real threats it encountered as soon as it began restoring its international status forced the Russian leaders to readjust the approach and very ideology of Russia's foreign policy. It must stop being reflective: the country badly needs a well-substantiated and maximally long-term foreign policy strategy. This should be done not so much to restore the international balance or create a multi-polar world order: this is a new approach to the old problem of secure borders achieved either by their extension or by at least enlarging the "security zone" around Russia.

Russia's absence from the Near Abroad allowed non-Russian capitals to deeply penetrate into the Central Asian economies, thus shifting the main foreign policy accents of Russia's neighbors in an

unwelcome direction. Today, the Central Asian countries are working hard to pursue multi-vectoral policies, otherwise known as “distance partnership.” It is at this time that the ideologies supported by the national elites of the new post-Soviet states are being radically transformed and pushing the countries further away from Russia. The nationalist discourse has triumphed: from this time on foreign policy is being shaped by national egotism and, on many occasions, serves it badly.

After about fifteen years of chaotic quest for their national identity, the local countries have finally arrived at the “state-centric” model (to borrow the term from J. Rosenau<sup>1</sup>) as a matrix determining everything, foreign policies included. All five Central Asian Soviet successor states have armed themselves with this philosophy of state-building, something that Russia approved of to a much greater extent than the foreign policy players who wanted to push the region toward liberal democracy. The non-linear nature of the contemporary political developments is responsible for the diverse models and trajectories of the Central Asian post-communist republics. Some of the regimes pretend to be liberal democracies of the Western type, others are developing into autocracies of hitherto unknown types, while still others are turning out to be hybrids. The non-linear development type is of a general nature, which means that the universal development models acceptable for all countries and nations are nothing more than a myth. When applied to Central Asia, the Western models were soon discredited by the failed reforms, appalling social differentiation, poverty, and political confrontation. More than that: today, the problems of further development in this region cannot be rectified by political technologies. The local elites have already realized that much, therefore Russia’s return is going on against a very favorable background.

Two recent sets of events clearly demonstrated that the “state-centric” model has been completely accepted and has triumphed. First, Uzbekistan’s post-Andijan ruptured strategic partnership with the United States; its joining the EurAsEC and the CSTO, the agreement on allied relations with Russia, and Uzbekistan’s greater involvement in the SCO. Second, the outwardly paradoxical result of the Kyrgyz “revolution” of 2005 that brought Kurmanbek Bakiev to power and spelt the bad failure of America’s policies. For objective and subjective reasons, the new president is pursuing an even more pro-Russian, and pro-Chinese, foreign policy than his predecessor. He is even less predictable than Askar Akaev. Today, Moscow’s seemingly short-term, yet well-substantiated foreign policy looks much more adequate in the Central Asian realities than the West’s aggressive policy and its pseudo-revolutionary technologies. The year 2005 marked a watershed: thanks to its consistent efforts to use its political weight to keep the political processes in the Central Asian republics within “the constitutional framework and national legislation,” Russia acquired new possibilities in the region. The fifteen years of the Euro-Atlantic community’s insistent efforts to influence domestic processes in the local countries now produce nothing but rejection. The Central Asian republics, being viewed as part of the former communist bloc, are believed to be susceptible to the transition to the democracy paradigm<sup>2</sup> based on the firm conviction that standard schemes and prescriptions initially geared at the requirements of the so-called Western world, when applied without discrimination, can remedy all the ills of any country.<sup>3</sup> Having detected the absence of a civil society in the Central Asian countries, the Americans and Europeans set themselves the task of creating it artificially, while the true needs of these countries lay in a different sphere: they needed stronger state institutions to be able to adequately respond to the challenges to their independence.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See: J. Rosenau, “Pre-Theory Revised: World Politics in an Era of Cascading Interdependence,” *International Studies Quarterly*, No. 1, 1984, pp. 3-29.

<sup>2</sup> See: T. Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, 2002, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> See: F. Vielmini, “Rol’ Rossii v opredelenii evropeysko-tsentral’noaziatskikh otnosheniy,” in: *Proekty sotrudnichestva i integratsii dlia Tsentral’noy Azii: sravnitelnyi analiz, vozmozhnosti i perspektivy*, ed. by A.A. Kniyazev, Bishkek, 2007, pp. 75-85.

<sup>4</sup> This is best illustrated by the OSCE, which is perceived in the region as an American tool used for carrying out its geopolitical designs; democratization is another such tool (see: P. Dunay, “The OSCE in Crisis,” *Chaillot Paper*, No. 88,

The post-Soviet inner typological kinship of the models of state and social development born by the shared historical experience has become the foundation on which cooperation between Russia and Central Asia (nearly lost in the 1990s) can be rebuilt. But this can only be a temporary, transitional foundation: the Central Asian elites are obviously unwilling to abandon their shaky status and the regimes' criminalized structure for the sake of democracy. This contradicts Russia's interests: it wants long-term stability in the region and is willing to limit its cooperation, for the sake of modernization of the Central Asian regimes, to the states and international business elites not inclined to build up tension and cause destruction by exporting unsuitable novelties. This is what should serve as the cornerstone of Russia's Central Asian strategy. America's policy for Central Asia based on double standards has already given Russia a chance to retrieve at least some of its former regional allies. The 2005 geopolitical U-turn performed by Uzbekistan is a serious sign of the region's disaffection with the American mission and evidence of Russia's readiness to take part in global projects alternative to the Western ones.

The political systems now functioning in the region are remnants of the Soviet system blended with certain specifics borrowed from the pre-colonial past. The communist ideology was replaced by the ideology of the ethnocratic states (or, in a milder form, "nationally oriented" states of which Kazakhstan is an example), but none of the Central Asian states can boast of a natural rivalry of political forces. In the absence of an ideological basis patterned on the new states' social development needs, the contradiction between the form and content made them even shakier than their communist predecessors. This means that Russia should not only support the sovereignties of its Central Asian partners, but also encourage political readjustments in all of them to help them achieve firmer stability and better efficiency. In fact, Russia's security depends on political stability in all the limitrophes.

In the absence of a long-term and well-substantiated Central Asian strategy, Russia can still draw from the wealth of experience created by its two-centuries-long presence in the region. No matter what, in order to return, Russia must devise absolutely new mechanisms of cooperation and realization of its regional interests. So far, the new and not yet completed conception deals with the tactical mid-term and currently realized tasks: control over the production and transit of Central Asian energy resources to the world markets; preservation and optimization of Russia's military presence in the region designed to forestall the threats coming from radical Islamists; helping the Central Asian regimes strengthen their sovereignties and preventing the "export of democracy;" and looking for a consensus with China's mounting influence in the region and preventing its domination.

Globalization has turned Russia's monopoly presence, and that of any other power for that matter, in any region into a utopia. To promote regional stability, Russia should seek partners to assist in the region's political and economic reconstruction among countries that want to achieve the same. The European Union is a potential partner; in turn, the EU has many logical reasons for choosing Russia as its key partner in Central Asia. If Russia is squeezed out of regional politics, Eurasia might find itself threatened.<sup>5</sup> So far, nearly everything that the United States and the European Union have initiated for Central Asia's economic and political progress was too obviously anti-Russian: the key actors of international politics remain rivals not yet prepared to effectively cooperate in the region. Any unbiased observer admits that American, European, or any other cooperation and integration projects should embrace not only the south, but also involve the north (Russia), the west (Iran), etc. It is naïve to expect Russia to remain on the curbside: it will promote its interests in the economic, political, cultural,

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April 2006). The Europeans approach the Central Asian security issue in a fairly technical way that lacks systemic treatment, while the issue as a long-term phenomenon calls for systemic and integral approaches. Today the European approaches are rejected with a great deal of frustration; more and more often the word "Bolshevist" is applied to the European treatment of the human rights issue, while the term "democracy" has become sort of a swear word—the best illustration of the high level of alienation (see: F. Vielmini, op. cit.). The same author offers a more detailed analysis in his *Continuità post-sovietica, autoritarismo politico e diritti umani in Asia Centrale*, ISPI, Milan, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> "Interview with A. Rahr. Russia Profile Weekly Experts Panel: Another New Year's Gas War," *Russia Profile*, 12 January, 2007.

and educational spheres of the former Soviet republics, as well as in Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, and other countries.<sup>6</sup>

The collective security sphere is a natural point where the interests of Russia and the Central Asian republics meet. Neither America, nor Europe, nor China will shoulder the responsibility for Central Asian security. The Americans have come to the region with their own interests in view. China is just learning how to cooperate with the region's states and obviously prefers economic cooperation.

This gives Russia a chance to develop military-political cooperation, the recent history of which is fairly contradictory. Immediately after 1991, Russia's military-political influence in Central Asia and the size of its military presence shrank. Russia lost some of its military bases in the local countries; meanwhile, military-political cooperation remains a priority. The events of 1999-2000 demonstrated that the military threat coming from the Central Asian sector was real and that, despite Russia's diminished influence in the region, it remains instrumental in dealing with its military-political problems. Proceeding from this, Russia can fully restore its presence in the sphere of security. In the absence of sufficient financial resources and the political will of the leaders of any of the Central Asian states to set up the necessary defense, potential military-political alliances and military-technical cooperation are the only effective security mechanisms. The limited military potential cannot be stretched to cover the entire range of military threats and threats of war: this calls for military-political integration and the pooling of forces within the regional collective security systems. All the Central Asian countries (with the exception of Turkmenistan) have demonstrated that they are aware of this by the mere fact of their CSTO membership (the organization functionally best suited to deal with the threats and challenges). One of the central theses of the 2007 Bishkek Declaration of the SCO summit clearly pointed out that the U.S. and NATO are unable to radically improve the situation in the regional security sphere: "Stability and security in Central Asia are best ensured primarily through efforts made by the nations of the region on the basis of the existing regional international associations."<sup>7</sup>

## The Economic Factor of Russia's Central Asian Policy

At one time, Andrey Snegarev, one of the founders of the Russian school of geopolitics, wrote: "Today economic conquests go ahead of military victories. It is not the nation that heaps up bayonets that is strong—the nation that holds the nets of economic conquest is stronger."<sup>8</sup> Currently, Russia is not only restoring its economic presence in the region, but is also strengthening it in a very tangible way. At present, Russia alone can implement large-scale projects by being involved in prospecting, producing, and transporting energy resources, extending military-technical cooperation, etc. which provide an impetus for regional integration. For instance, in 2000-2006, over 40 percent of direct investments in Tajikistan came from Russia.<sup>9</sup> True, so far, trade and economic relations with the Central Asian countries are of secondary importance for Russia: in 2006, the aggregate share of these countries in Russia's foreign trade turnover was about 3 percent (in China's foreign trade, it was 0.6 per-

<sup>6</sup> See: V.S. Boyko, "Bol'shaia Tsentral'naia Azia i Rossia: osobennosti istoriko-tsivilizatsionnogo, geopoliticheskogo i ekonomicheskogo vzaimodeystvia," in: *Proekty sotrudnichestva i integratsii dlia Tsentral'noy Azii: sravnitel'nyi analiz, vozmozhnosti i perspektivy*, pp. 50-57.

<sup>7</sup> [<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav082007a.shtml>].

<sup>8</sup> *Afganskie uroki: Vyvody dlia budushchego v svete ideynogo nasledia A.E. Snegareva*, Compiled by A.E. Savinkin, Voeny universitet, Russkiy put, Moscow, 2003, p. 102.

<sup>9</sup> See: *Regnum*, 6 June, 2007.

cent). Russia's share in Kyrgyzstan's foreign trade was 27.24 percent; in Uzbekistan's, 16.39 percent; and in Kazakhstan's, 18.87 percent. These figures invariably keep Russia at the top of the list of foreign trade partners. On average, in 2006 the Russia's share in the foreign trade turnover of the Central Asian countries was about 17 percent (China's share was about 12 percent).<sup>10</sup>

Russia's involvement in Central Asian politics and economics at the macro-, regional, and microregional levels (cooperation between territories, regions, business structures, educational and research institutions, etc.) is an important imperative conducive to the new climate, cooperation, and even integration on a bilateral or multilateral basis in the entire Central Asian region, including China's Xinjiang and Russia's Altai and Southern Siberia. Russia's interests can be harmonized with those of the United States, the activities of which have, for several years, been irritating not only the inveterate patriots, but also the pragmatically minded people. A. Bogaturov has the following to say on this score: "The issue of Russia's greater role in ensuring the U.S.'s energy needs is no longer purely theoretical. So far the northern route of deliveries of Russian energy resources to the United States via Murmansk attracts more attention than the southern (south Siberian, to be more exact) route. If, however, America's efforts to create the transportation routes through which energy resources will be moved from the center of the Eurasian continent to the south prove successful, it might become critically important for Russia to join the project."<sup>11</sup> This argument has only one, but important, flaw: America's plans to move energy resources from Central Asia are prompted by political, rather than economic, considerations. The U.S. is resolved to create alternatives to the Russian transit and the Chinese vector of fuel deliveries from Central Asia. The operating cost of any of the Western alternatives will be higher than that of the Russian variant, therefore involvement in the pro-Western projects will demand much greater investments and much greater guarantees from the Central Asian states.<sup>12</sup>

## The Cultural-Civilizational Aspect

The history of Russia's influence in Asia is a history of certain elements of the European civilization in the region. There is an obvious common interest in preserving the Russian language as a

<sup>10</sup> See: V.V. Paramonov, A.V. Stokov, "Ekonomicheskoe prisutstvie Rossii i Kitaia v Tsentral'noy Azii—klyuchevoy vopros dlia budushchego EvrAzES i ShOS," in: *Proekty sotrudnichestva i integratsii dlia Tsentral'noy Azii: sravnitel'nyi analiz, vozmozhnosti i perspektivy*, pp. 153-160.

The average regional index of Russia's investment activities is decreasing because of the foreign investments in Kazakhstan's oil and gas complex: by the beginning of 2007, the volume of American investments reached \$13.8 billion, or 30 percent of the total direct foreign investments in Kazakhstan. At the same time, Russian companies are responsible for over half of foreign investments in Uzbekistan's oil and gas sector; there are over 450 JVs in Uzbekistan with Russian capital. During President Putin's visit to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in May 2007, the two Central Asian presidents confirmed that cooperation with Russia in the oil and gas sphere was a priority. President Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan was the most eloquent: "Kazakhstan is wholeheartedly devoted to the idea that, even if not all the oil and gas produced, at least its larger part should be moved across Russian territory." It was also agreed to increase the load of the transit oil pipeline of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (connecting northwestern Kazakhstan and Russia) from the present 29 million to 40 million tons. There were certain shifts in attracting Russian investments and the resources of Gazprom to maintain and develop gas extraction in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The main event took place on 12 May when the heads of Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan signed a declaration on building a Caspian gas pipeline with a capacity of 10 billion c m and on extending and modernizing the Central Asia-Center pipeline system. The document obligated the sides to present, before 1 September, feasibility studies, and intergovernmental and commercial agreements on a consortium. It is expected that by 2014 the gas transportation capacities will rise from the present 60 billion to 90 billion c m (see: A. Sobianin, M. Shibusov, "Dozhdiomsia li rossisko-kazakhstanskoy global'noy ekspansii?" *Respublika. Delovoe obozrenie*, Almaty, 25 May, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> A. Bogaturov, "Indo-sibirskiy koridor v strategii contrterrorizma," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 24 October, 2005, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> The former will cross the mountains or cross seas, while the second prove to be much shorter. For these reasons, the bypassing routes invariably turn out to be much more expensive. For example, the cost of the trans-Caspian gas pipeline and the still missing sectors of the Nabucco line are estimated at \$10 billion, while the Russian project for modernizing and extending the Central Asian gas pipeline is estimated at \$1 billion (see: A. Sobianin, M. Shibusov, op. cit.).

passkey to the world culture.<sup>13</sup> It is not merely an element that brings the local nations closer and facilitates their interaction. Recent history has demonstrated that, deprived of an educational system based on the Russian, the Central Asian nations proved unable to respond to the globalization challenges. The loss of the Russian tongue is directly responsible for the degradation of the Central Asian societies, the spread of primitive Islamism and, in any case, the drift away from the European principles.<sup>14</sup> The new nature of the Russia-Central Asia relations leaves no space for the ideological constructs (very much in fashion in the 1990s) that spoke of unequal relations with Russia in the past and even “exploitation.”

As distinct from the 19th and 20th centuries, Russia is no longer exerting demographic pressure on Central Asia today. The wide-scale migration flows from the Central Asian countries to Russia testify that it needs Central Asian human resources. This suggests that integration with Russia should be peaceful and non-violent, very much as it was in the past. There is no truth to the thesis that Russia and the Russians, due to their strong “guilt complex” about the numerous faults and excesses of the imperial and Soviet periods, cannot be involved on an equal footing in Central Asian affairs. Millions of Russian/Soviet citizens, ethnic Russians, were only too aware, probably to an even greater extent, of the internal colonialism in social and other spheres and of the disdain with which the Center treated the peripheries.<sup>15</sup>

Today, Central Asia, even in its most distorted interpretation of the 1990s, is moving to Russia—millions of ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks and members of other local nationalities have already moved there forever or, at least, for a long time, or as seasonal workers. They are a connecting link or even a lifeline between their homelands and Russia. In Russia, especially in the southern border regions and territories, Asian diasporas are gradually developing into sustainable national communities and are even acquiring certain status privileges and legal rights.

Russia, which developed as an empire and a world state, cannot abandon the strategy of a world power. It will perish if it abandons its traditional policy of a world player and will thus endanger the outside world, not only because Europe depends economically on Russia to a great extent and cannot escape this dependence. If the policy of minimal sufficiency gains the upper hand in Russia, the Russian mentality will inevitably develop a bias toward nationalism, which will push the country toward an ethnocratic state. This is highly dangerous. The symptoms can already be detected: nationalism and phobias of all kinds (ethnic, religious, interregional, race, etc.) are on the upsurge. This phenomenon is not limited to Russia alone—by the beginning of the 21st century, the world was left without its familiar mobilizing ideologies (socialism, democracy, etc.).

The ideological roots of what is going on in Russia are found in the global humiliation of the Russian nation and Russia as a whole, which, as the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, was one of the world’s leaders. The country’s collapse placed the Russians in a very ambiguous position: accustomed to being the leader, they are suffering from an “identity crisis.” This is prompting energetic or even violent defense of their identity and an active quest for its best characteristics. The situation is complicated by the fact that not all those coming to Russia from the former Soviet republics are law-abiding citizens capable of adapting to the Russian environment. Not all of them wish to adapt themselves; some probably cannot because of culturological reasons. Meanwhile, public opinion is not looking at the details: in Ekaterinburg, for example, the negative attitude toward the Tajik drug dealers has spread to the Tajik diaspora as a whole. Nationalism and xenophobia have objective economic (the region is depressed), social (mass unemployment and particularly latent unemployment), and historical reasons. At all times, provincial Russia responded acutely to the threat of disintegration and

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<sup>13</sup> See: E. Abdullaev, “Uzbekistan between Traditionalism and Westernization,” in: *Central Asia at the End of Transition*, ed. by B. Rumer, M.E. Sharpe, New York, London, 2005, pp. 267-68.

<sup>14</sup> See: F. Vielmini, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> See: V.S. Boyko, op. cit.

loss of identity and always sided with those who articulated these threats. In any case, we should talk not of ethnic conflicts but, rather, of ethnic tension, which has not reached its critical level. The problem itself must be comprehended in order for Russia's multicultural society and multicultural state to evolve in the right direction. This is absolutely justified by the country's history—it has been and remains polyethnic. Today it is the only one of the Soviet successor states to reject the ethnocentric model. A new ethnonational structure is coming into being in Russia's Asian part and in some of the central regions (particularly in large cities and the capitals) with obvious Central Asian features and forms of life, residual, renovating, or convergent. These, mainly spontaneous, processes should be complemented with purposeful efforts aimed at developing regional, trans-border, and other contacts.<sup>16</sup>

Labor migration makes Central Asia dependent on Russia: in 2006 alone, labor migrants from the CIS countries wired home over \$3 billion and took over \$10 billion in cash out of the country. The aggregate annual income of labor migrants was \$20 billion. For Russia, which is in need of workers, these figures, as an index of hypothetical economic damage, are absolutely unimportant, while for the countries that receive the migrants' money (particularly Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan), these sums are all-important. Muzaffar Sharipov, who heads the Information-Resource Center for Labor Migrants of Tajikistan, has admitted: "Russia remains the main labor market for Tajik guest workers." Since the beginning of 2007, writes he, over 630,000 left Tajikistan to earn money elsewhere. "According to our information, about 90 percent of them went to Russia's regions, while a little more than 40,000 of our labor migrants went to Kazakhstan."<sup>17</sup> The money that labor migrants send back home to Tajikistan from Russia is twice as much as the republic's budget; the figure for Kyrgyzstan is lower, but in both cases the fact that labor migration relieves social tension, with which the ineffective economies of both republics can barely cope, is all-important.

### *In Lieu of a Conclusion*

The Central Asian countries have not yet chosen more or less consistent foreign policies in relation to all the geopolitical players, Russia included. This is preventing any sustainable partnership between them and Russia. This vagueness is justified by the euphemism about the so-called "multi-vectoral" policy that became a dogma in the 1990s and is put forward every time an explanation has to be given for the far-from-consistent policies suggested by the objective and subjective, but mostly short-term, interests that rarely, or never, serve genuinely national interests. The local countries have no long-term strategies in any sphere of cooperation (political, economic, or any other).

Russia's, and the Russians', desire to remain in Asia, and Central Asia in particular, is largely explained by the old philosophical and political, as well as new specific political, ideas (the Asianism of E. Ukhomskiy or the Eurasianism and neo-Eurasianism of the 1920s and 1990s).<sup>18</sup> Today this process is going on under the impact of more important factors—geopolitical, geo-economic, demographic, migrational, and others, even though it is not simply a product of globalization. Central Asia's borders are fairly flexible—today, as in the past, they do not coincide with the state borders—they are frontiers of a cultural-civilizational area,<sup>19</sup> at which, in the case of Russia, the Slavic Christian and the (predominantly) Turkic-Muslim worlds meet.

<sup>16</sup> See: *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> *Regnum*, 25 July, 2007. According to the Shark Research Center, 94.7 percent of the total flow of labor migrants goes to Russia; 2.4 percent to Kazakhstan, and 2.9 percent each to Ukraine, Byelorussia, Kyrgyzstan and Moldova. The real unemployment level in Tajikistan is 11.3 percent; urban unemployment is 13.2 percent; agricultural unemployment, 10.9 percent; the share of unemployed among the young people is the largest—68.9 percent.

<sup>18</sup> See: D. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, "Aziatskiy soblazn Rossii," *Kosmopolis*, No. 3, 2002/2003 [URL: <http://risa.ru/cosmopolis/archives/2/shimmelpenninck.html>].

<sup>19</sup> See: V.S. Boyko, *op. cit.*

Russia has always been a very specific imperial project deprived of any commercial sense: the empire as a huge territorial-spatial complex was set up for political considerations in an effort to place Russia in the center of a vast, well-ordered, and well-protected expanse. Russia moved to Asia to protect its territory rather than being driven by certain syncretic Eurasian doctrines that speak of Russia's mission as "keeping together the vast Eurasian expanse."

This approach presupposed much more organic mutual penetration of the metropolitan country and the colonies than, say, in the case of Britain, another great empire. It was a purely commercial project with numerous domains scattered across the world and far removed from the metropolitan country. They were "branches of a huge firm" called the United Kingdom. When the project began losing money, it was closed down.

As a result, Russia's role in the colonization of Central Asia was a systemic one; it was a regulator of the main regional balancing tools. Besides, Russia has been, and remains, the most effective (even if merely potential in recent years) vector of modernization for the Central Asian political systems and the most acceptable example of political culture. In the Central Asian countries, the state structures play an important political role. Russia is a vector of orientation, if not toward democracy in the classical sense, then toward greater pluralism inside the Central Asian political systems.

This background supplies the Russian post-imperial project in the widest sense with the right of continued existence. Russia's continental profile as a state does not allow it to be anything but a great power, a status it is rapidly restoring. This explains why no more or less important international problems can be resolved without Russia and contrary to Russia; this is even truer of the problems in the region, which, despite the post-Soviet losses, remains a sphere of Russia's national interests and where it has preserved the largest number of factors of influence.