

Russia's Eurasian Großraum and its Consequences

VB verfassungsblog.de/russias-eurasian-groraum-and-its-consequences/



Achilles Skordas

This article belongs to the debate » [Sicherheitsstrategie nach der Zeitenwende: Institutionen, Recht, Politik](#)

31 March 2022

I. Russian expansionism in the 21st century

The available options for the German and Western policy towards Russia have to be based on the correct diagnosis of the causes of the conflict. The purpose of this analysis is to shed some light on the structural reasons for the Russian expansionism and make some projections on the possible long-term consequences. The rivalry between the Russian-dominated space (*Großraum* – greater space) and the EU/NATO systems fuels an intense geopolitical antagonism in Europe, which can be transformed into actual conflict. I understand the *Großraum* in the sense of Carl Schmitt as a tightly managed sphere of interests *sui generis*, under the direct or indirect control of an authoritarian Great Power (infra II).

The Strategic Compass, adopted by the Council of the EU on 21 March 2022, stated that ‘through this armed interference in Georgia and Ukraine, the de facto control over Belarus, as well as the continued presence of Russian troops in protracted conflicts, including in the Republic of Moldova, the Russian government is actively aiming to establish so-called spheres of influence’ (p. 7). The latter term has a broader and more general meaning compared to *Großraum*.

The effort to expand its *Großraum* in a period of turbulence is possibly linked to broader objectives of Russia. Sergei Karaganov, President of the Russian Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and an influential player in foreign policy circles, argued last year that Russia and the West²⁾ were engaging in their third cold war, following the first in the interwar period and the second that ended with the defeat of the Soviet Union in 1989. According to Karaganov, the Russian system of authoritarian governance is well positioned to win the third cold war against the West with China’s support.³⁾ In its generality, his analysis may not be an authoritative statement of official policy, but it shows the broader horizon of geopolitical debates under way in Moscow and their misconceptions.

II. Reality and fragility of the Eurasian *Großraum*

Whether the Eurasian space constitutes a *Großraum* has to be substantiated. The concept itself is controversial,⁴⁾ but here I focus only on the question, whether it can be meaningfully applied in the current situation. It is notable that Schmitt has enjoyed in recent years a revival in China,⁵⁾ and this is evidence that this approach can be a useful instrument for the analysis of authoritarian states. For this purpose, it is not necessary to de- and re-construct the concept.

The *Großraum* is a polyvalent but 'dangerous' concept combining elements of international law and geopolitics. Developed – but not invented – by Carl Schmitt during the Second World War, the term is heavily context-dependent, but can be also generalized under conditions. The '*Großraum* principle' indicates the 'concrete ordering' in a geopolitical system that fulfills some additional legal and factual conditions, one of which is the particularism of its legal and political philosophy. For Schmitt, the Monroe doctrine was the archetypal form of the *Großraum* principle.⁶⁾ However, due to its transformation from a particularist doctrine for the Western Hemisphere into a means for capitalist-imperialist universalism and expansion, he argued that it lost its *raison d'être*. Whilst particularism describes a value-system supporting a concrete order, based on historical evolution and cultural-national traditions, universalism endorses general and abstract principles and values and therefore transforms the world into a single open space, which is, according to Schmitt, incompatible with the *Großraum* principle.⁷⁾

The *Großraum* does not exist in a power vacuum. It presupposes the dominance of a Great Power (Reich) with a people inspired by a political ideal, linked to a broader territorial area and capable of excluding other powers from the relevant space. According to Schmitt, there is a close link between the 'Reich', the political ideal of its people, and the *Großraum* with the states it contains.⁸⁾ The combination of particularism with these elements implies an authoritarian form of national and transnational governance. In addition, energy economy had arguably been at the origins of the *Großraumwirtschaft* (economy of greater space) in the technical-industrial era in Europe and Germany at the beginning of the 20th century,⁹⁾ just as the energy economy plays a fundamental role in the Eurasian space nowadays, because it enables Russia to exercise geopolitical influence by manipulating the integrated networks of the Soviet period.¹⁰⁾

It is difficult to think of Western democracies forming themselves into a *Großraum* in the above sense.¹¹⁾ China's geopolitical sphere of interest has partly different characteristics and requires further analysis. The Eurasian space, though, fulfills *prima facie* the conditions of a Reich (Russia) and its *Großraum*. This is due to its historical and structural continuities with the Czarist Empire and the USSR, to Russia's political supremacy and cultural role, including the use of the Russian language as *lingua franca*, to the authoritarian political traditions, the energy economy, and the particularism of the ideology of Eurasianism,¹²⁾ combined with the Russian ethno-nationalism that was at the core of President Putin's essay 'on the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians' of 12 July 2021. All these elements, taken together, establish the existence of a Eurasian *Großraum* under Russian leadership.

The *Großraum* was created on the ruins of the Soviet Union through multilateral agreements, including in particular the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The sequence of serious crises and other developments that recently jolted the *Großraum* is impressive: peaceful popular revolt in Belarus bringing the regime near collapse (August 2020), war between Armenia and Azerbaijan (September-November 2020), successful popular revolt against the Kyrgyz government (October 2020), election of pro-EU Maia Sandu as President of Moldova (November/December 2020), armed clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in a border dispute linked to water reserves and energy insecurity with about fifty deaths (April 2021), violent insurgency in Kazakhstan with more than two hundred deaths and intervention of the CSTO in January 2022.

The recurring tensions between centrifugal and centripetal forces that cannot be resolved by democratic means cause a constant friction and deepen the space's instability. The *Großraum's* insecurity, the United States' presumed distraction due to its 'pivot to Asia', its perceived weakness after the attack against the Congress on 6. January 2021 and its defeat in Afghanistan on 15. August of the same year, have encouraged Russia in its effort to enlarge and tighten the control over the space under its tutelage. This could be the time in which the alleged maximal, but temporary, weakness of the West corresponded to the moment in which Russia's Great Power status, comparable to the USSR, could still be restored by a flight forward and a 'storm of steel'. Vladimir Putin decided to act and implement Russia's long-standing plans.

III. Implementing the *Großraum* principle

Two draft agreements proposed by Russia on 17 December 2021 constituted an effort to implement the *Großraum* principle. The two drafts may not be in the discussion, at least for now, but they represent long-term goals of Russian foreign policy, as evidenced by their similarity to draft agreements already proposed in 2009.

The draft 'Treaty between The United States of America and the Russian Federation on security guarantees' and the draft 'Agreement on measures to ensure the security of the Russian Federation and member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization' complement each other and are based on common principles. There are three important elements in the texts: first, the legal foundation of Russia's claim to an extended *Großraum*; the enumeration of the territories (old and new) included in the *Großraum*; and the status of these territories.

The legal foundation justifying the extension of the *Großraum* in both texts is the principle of 'indivisible, equal and undiminished security' in the European space. Russia justified this principle by citing the OSCE Istanbul Charter of European Security (1999) and the OSCE Astana Commemorative Declaration 'Towards a Security Community' (2010). The crucial point 3 of that Declaration stated the following:

The security of each participating State is inseparably linked to that of all others. Each participating State has an equal right to security. We reaffirm the inherent right of each and every participating State to be free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance, as they evolve. (...) They will not strengthen their security at the expense of the security of other States.

Russia argued that the fundamental principle was expressed by the last sentence (indivisible security) and that the right to choose or change alliances was recognized under the condition 'as they evolve', which meant that 'military alliances must abandon their initial deterrence function and integrate into the all-European architecture based on collective approaches, rather than narrow groups'. Accordingly, NATO's Eastern expansion was incompatible with the principle of indivisible security.

As far as the status of the affected space is concerned, the two draft agreements introduce severe restrictions over the foreign policy choices of third States. The United States should 'prevent further eastward expansion of the NATO' and deny accession to the Alliance to the States of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' and will not establish any military bases on these States, if they are not NATO members (Art. 4). The parties should not deploy military forces 'in areas where such deployment could be perceived by the other party as a threat to its national security', even if the deployment would take place in the framework of international organizations (Art. 5). Obviously, peacekeeping operations in the *Großraum* should be conducted only with Russia's consent.

The draft Agreement between Russia and the NATO members is more explicit. It would ban any military activities 'on the territory of Ukraine as well as other States in the Eastern Europe, in the South Caucasus and in Central Asia' (Art. 7). More importantly, it provides that Russia and those states that were NATO members on 27 May 1997, when the Russia-NATO Founding Act was signed, 'shall not deploy military forces and weaponry on the territory of any of the other States in Europe in addition to the forces stationed on that territory as of 27 May 1997' (Art. 4).

Later, the Foreign Ministry, responding to a question on the status of Bulgaria and Romania, called this provision 'a cornerstone' of Russia's proposals and emphasized the necessity of 'utmost clarity to avoid any ambiguity'. And then they stated the following: 'We are talking about the withdrawal of foreign forces, equipment, and weapons, as well as taking other steps to return to the set-up we had in 1997 in non-NATO countries. This includes Romania and Bulgaria.' It is clear that the ultimate purpose of Russia is to push the United States out of Europe and disable NATO as an effective alliance.

IV. Conclusions

1. Europe and the West are trapped in history and there is no return to the pre-2/24 era. This was the meaning of the *Zeitenwende* announced by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz. The war in Ukraine has not been the result of Putin's caprice, even though he is its architect; this is not the war of a rising, but of a declining Power and it should be understood as an effort to reverse the ongoing decay of a system based on an oil and gas economy.

2. The weaknesses of the Russian army provide no assurances that the Russian expansionism will necessarily fail or that it does not have the capacity to cause havoc on the European continent. The old conflict between maritime and land powers was replaced by the conflict between Russia and the West's capacity to exclude it from the international economic system via sanctions. It might be tempting to argue that such pressures can bring Russia to its knees, but the reality is more complex. The pandemic and the current conflict lead to the de-coupling of major economies from each other and to the increased fragmentation and regionalization of what is called 'global economy'. Russia might still find economic support in the adjacent Asian and Chinese spaces.

3. As the CEO of Blackrock Larry Fink stated in his annual letter to the company's shareholders (24 March 2022), 'the Russian invasion of Ukraine has put an end to the globalization we have experienced over the last three decades'. This raises the question which kind of changes and choices the world is facing. Apparently, Russia and China are already designing the principles of an alternative authoritarian global governance order that would overcome the system of the rules-based liberal international order advanced by the West. Russia is already on the verge of turning into a 21st century fascist State.

4. Germany has the responsibility to defend itself and its allies and to contribute significantly to the preservation of peace and security under the UN Charter.¹⁶⁾ Moreover, Germany as a Power at the 'center' of Europe¹⁷⁾ has a particular responsibility towards the other states of the European geopolitical system.

5. Russia must be defeated. This is the only path to stop the Russian imperialism and its *Drang nach Westen*. As long as the Ukrainian people are willing to fight, the West must give them all assistance they require, short of a direct involvement of NATO in the hostilities.

References

↑1 Hanspeter Neuhold, Spheres of Influence, MPEPIL.

↑2 I understand the 'West' as the geopolitical space of democracies in the developed world that are associated with, or follow in practice, the security policies of the United States or NATO.

↑3 Sergej Karaganov, Vom Dritten Kalten Krieg, Osteuropa 71 (7) (2021), 15-27.

-
- ↑**4** See for instance, Anthony Carty, Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberal International Legal Order Between 1933 and 1945, *Leiden Journal of International Law* 14 (2001) 25–76; Dirk Blasius, Carl Schmitt, April 1939, 'Der Reichsbegriff im Völkerrecht', *Der Staat* 60 (2021), 455–472.
-
- ↑**5** Xie Libin/Haig Patapan, Schmitt Fever: The use and abuse of Carl Schmitt in contemporary China, *ICON* 18 (2020), 130–146.
-
- ↑**6** Carl Schmitt, *Völkerrechtliche Großraumordnung*, Duncker und Humblot 1991 [1941], 22 ff.
-
- ↑**7** Carl Schmitt, *Großraum gegen Universalismus*, in: the same, *Positionen und Begriffe*, 3rd ed., Duncker und Humblot, Berlin, 1994 [1940], 335-343 (342).
-
- ↑**8** Carl Schmitt, *Völkerrechtliche Großraumordnung*, 49 ff., 30.
-
- ↑**9** Id., 11-13.
-
- ↑**10** See Anatole Boute, *Energy Security along the New Silk Road*, CUP, 2019, 129-132, 167-170; F. Stephen Larrabee, *Russia, Ukraine, and Central Europe: the Return of Geopolitics*, *Journal of International Affairs* 63(2) (2010), 33-52, at 40.
-
- ↑**11** But see also the relevant discussion of Joerges and Walker on the EU, in: Christian Joerges/Navraj Singh Galeigh (eds), *Darker Legacies of Law in Europe*, Hart, 2003, pp. 166 ff., 193 ff.
-
- ↑**12** See briefly Achilles Skordas, *The European Union as post-national realist power*, in: Blockmans/Koutrakos (eds), *Research Handbook on the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy*, Routledge, 2018, at 410-411.
-
- ↑**13** IISS, *Strategic Survey – The Annual Assessment of Geopolitics 2021*, Routledge, 2021, 217-260.
-
- ↑**14** Text by Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, No. 134-01-02-2022.
-
- ↑**15** The Foreign Ministry's answers to the media questions, No. 77-21-01-2022.
-
- ↑**16** Bastian Giegerich/Maximilian Terhalle, *The Responsibility to Defend – Rethinking Germany's Strategic Culture*, IISS, Routledge, 2021.
-
- ↑**17** Herfried Münkler, *Macht in der Mitte – Die neuen Aufgaben Deutschlands in Europa*, Körber-Stiftung, 2015.
-

References



[LICENSED UNDER CC BY SA](#)

[EXPORT METADATA](#)

[Marc21 XMLMODSDublin CoreOAI PMH 2.0](#)

SUGGESTED CITATION Skordas, Achilles: *Russia's Eurasian Großraum and its Consequences*, *VerfBlog*, 2022/3/31, <https://verfassungsblog.de/russias-eurasian-groraum-and-its-consequences/>, DOI: [10.17176/20220331-131155-0](https://doi.org/10.17176/20220331-131155-0).

Explore posts related to this:

[LICENSED UNDER CC BY SA](#)