

The “Belt and Road” in Russia: Evolution of Expert Discourse

From Caution to Euphoria to Disappointment

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Abstract

Conceived in the fall of 2013, China’s “Belt and Road” initiative in the following five years became one of the most discussed issues among Russian international relations experts. The discussions produced a plethora of academic, expert and op-ed articles designed to explain to society and the political elite what the “Belt and Road” initiative actually was and *what we should do with it*. Albeit differing methodologically, stylistically and ideologically, the articles on the whole testify to the existence of certain political discourse specific to Russia. Moreover, the authors believe it possible to trace the evolution of this

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discourse over the past five years from caution to euphoria from the prospects opening up for Russia and further to some disappointment. The authors' argumentation is based on the analysis of available literature, a series of interviews with Russian international relations experts, and anonymized surveys involving twenty pundits who published academic and analytical works related to the “Belt and Road” initiative in 2014-2017.

Keywords: China, “Belt and Road,” integration, Russian-Chinese cooperation, discourse, critical geopolitics

In the fall of 2018 the world was trying to assess the first results of China's much touted “Belt and Road” initiative launched five years ago. Contrary to expectations, the actual economic results (at least as far as concrete projects are concerned) are not as impressive as many analysts and the Chinese authors themselves anticipated at first. But this does not mean that the initiative has proved abortive or failed to become a significant factor in world politics.

Over the past five years (but particularly in 2014-2017), the Chinese initiative was one of the main issues for Russian international relations experts and nearly the central one for sinologists. Their discussions produced a plethora of academic, expert and op-ed articles designed to explain to society and the political elite what the “Belt and Road” initiative actually *was about* and *what we should do with it*.

Albeit differing methodologically, stylistically and ideologically, the articles on the whole testify to the existence of certain political discourse specific to Russia. By discourse we mean a system of notions determining the worldview and behavioral practices of certain society, in this particular case, different groups of Russian intellectuals who offer their interpretations of international relations. In practical terms, such discourse is important because the people who implement foreign policy decisions are either part of this discourse or experience its effects in one way or another. Some situations (such as protests against amendments to Kazakhstan's Land Code in 2016 or a negative reaction to the Trans-Baikal Territory authorities' decision to rent out vacant lands in the Russian Far East to the Chinese company Huae

Sinban in 2015) prove that public discourse, which is directly linked to the expert discourse and molded by it to a certain extent, can have an immediate impact on the authorities' decisions.

The understanding of how the expert discourse in Russia on such an important international issue as the Chinese "Road and Belt" initiative (virtually Beijing's entire integration and foreign economic agenda is implemented under its umbrella) was started, evolved and characterized gives us one more tool for interpreting Russia's policy with regard to China and forecasting its possible changes.

This article attempts to study the Russia-specific discourse on the "Road and Belt" initiative and its evolution in 2013-2018. The authors, who represent the Moscow and Far Eastern schools of sinology, spent much of their effort during this period trying to interpret China's actions to implement its "Belt and Road" initiative (the most significant studies include those by Gabuev, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Zuenko, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018). At the same time, achieving the set goal required the authors to refrain from absolutizing their own views and give a comprehensive picture of the expert discourse involving different opinions, including those with which the authors usually polemicize in open discussions. We employed a set of research tools to this end.

Our conclusions are based on the analysis of three collections of articles released by different Russian think tanks (Petrovsky, 2016; Yakunin, 2016; Kokarev, 2016), as well as more than 50 articles by Russian authors that appeared in academic and publicistic editions (the most significant ones are listed in the References section below). The analysis of open sources was complemented with a survey involving ten experts who published major works on the "Belt and Road" initiative in 2014-2017 (including, in alphabetical order, Denisov, I., Kashin, V., Korostikov, M., Larin, A., Lukonin, S., Smirnova, L., Zuban, S., as well as three experts who asked not to be named. The authors express their gratitude to the respondents for their invaluable assistance). All of them were asked the same questions, but the respondents were informed that their answers would be anonymized in the survey report (presumably this encouraged them to be sincere). The following questions were asked: 1) What do you think about the "Belt and Road"

initiative and should your state participate in its implementation (if yes, how)? 2) What is the territorial coverage of the initiative and what possibilities and risks does it involve? 3) How do you visualize the project in, say, ten years from now and what problems does it face? In the final part of the survey we asked the respondents to name the most important publications and the most influential experts working on this issue. This information was then used to augment and correct the list of representative literature.

We also learned about the nature of the Russian expert discourse during scientific conferences and formal and informal interviews with modern China specialists from Russia, China, the United States, Germany, Singapore, and Kazakhstan. Since assessing an outside view on the Russian expert community deserves a separate big study, the authors have intentionally limited their analysis to Russian publications.

For the readers' convenience, the work is divided into several sections. It starts with an overview of Russian literature on the “Belt and Road” initiative, based on which we classified experts' opinions into several relative groups subsequently referred to throughout the text. The analytical part includes three sections which describe Russian experts' views on the “Belt and Road” initiative as a geopolitical reality, as an opportunity for the socioeconomic development of the country, and finally as a challenge. These are followed by the conclusion characterizing the evolution of the expert discourse and its connection with political decisions. The main analytical results of the study are presented in the final section.

THE RANGE OF OPINIONS

Russian academics and experts promptly responded to Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech in Astana (September 3, 2017). The Russian discourse developed at a time when China was only beginning to flesh out its concept. Since 2013-2014 a large number of academic, experts and publicistic articles on the “Silk Road Economic Belt” (part of the “Belt and Road” concept which is most important for Russia) and the Chinese initiative as a whole have been published in Russia. Interestingly, this issue was addressed by both specialists studying China and

their colleagues studying Central Asia as well as political scientists, economists, and transport and soft power experts. This produced scores of media materials which were based solely on the intuitive assessment of the Chinese concept and which used confusing terminology in Russian-language publications. In most cases the name of the concept is written incorrectly as “One Belt—One Road” (as a comparison) instead of “One Belt, One Road” (as plain listing). The use of the tentative term ‘New Silk Road’ should not be considered a mistake because it has become widespread in journalistic and academic writing even though initially it was used to denote the American policy in Central Asia.

Most of these articles were purely educational in nature and gave a brief overview of the “Silk Road Economic Belt,” its route, and, put crudely, whether their readers should be *afraid of it*. The absence of clear guidelines from China prompted broad interpretations of its actions and their consequences for Russia. As Larisa Smirnova (Xiamen University) has rightfully pointed out: “In crisis-stricken Russia, the ‘Belt and Road’ concept fell on fertile ground, quickly turning into the subject of domestic speculations in Russia. At present, Chinese rhetoric has only limited influence on the internal debates in Russia. The discussion keeps going among Russians who have turned the Chinese initiative into a tool for articulating their own problems” (from an unpublished interview).

The first attempts at a deep analysis of this issue were registered only in 2016 and even they were made in academic articles whose authors largely duplicated or challenged each other’s conclusions, thus revealing the absence of a clear understanding of the “Belt and Road” initiative. The first collection of works addressing this issue titled “The New Silk Road and Its Significance for Russia” (Petrovsky, 2016) was published by the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (primary institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences for studying East Asia was founded in 1966 when relations between the Soviet Union and China cooled).

The collection describes the Chinese initiative in an amicable but reserved manner. Its main message boils down to the following: “Since

the New Silk Road is already a given and Russia cannot change anything, it should use it in its own interests. Expected gains for the Russian economy slightly outweigh apprehensions over security threats and a possible loss by Russia of its influence in Central Asia” (as stated by the authors in the aforementioned collection of works).

Two more comprehensive studies appeared in the same year 2016. One of them was a collection of works titled “One Belt—One Road. The Leading Strategy of China’s Internal and Foreign Policy” (Kokarev, 2016) and published by the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (affiliated with the Russian presidential administration and created in 1992 to provide information and analytical support to the head of state). The other one was an analytical report titled “Chinese Global Project for Eurasia: Problem Statement” (Yakunin, 2016), published by the Center for Crisis Society Studies (an independent analytical center founded in 2006 and close to the conservative part of the Russian political elite. Most of its publications are prepared by invited experts). Its authors include such well-known experts as Alexander Lukin, Sergei Luzyanin, Igor Denisov, and Konstantin Syroyezhkin (Kazakhstan). Its science editor is Vladimir Yakunin, former president of Russian Railways, who is known for his close affiliation with the Kremlin.

Both works understand the geopolitical map of the world in a way which is shared by a considerable part of the Russian political elite and expert community. It portrays the current historical period as a time of the crumbling unipolar world, with the Chinese initiative offering a chance to build a new, polycentric world where Russia and China would become equal centers of power (as stated by the authors in the aforementioned collections of works).

Among the works which are not focused entirely on the “Belt and Road” initiative but touch upon it anyway are analytical reports of the Valdai Discussion Club (founded in 2004, this expert and analytical center positions itself as an “international intellectual forum”; financed by a foundation created, among others, by state and near-state Russian structures such as the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, Moscow State Institute of International Relations (University) of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the National Research

University-Higher School of Economics), which have had the greatest influence on the expert discourse, but primarily its “Towards the Great Ocean-3” report titled “The Silk Road Economic Belt and Priorities of Joint Development of Eurasian States” (Valdai Club, 2015). Some experts (survey materials, March 2017) believe that the report, issued in March 2015, marked the beginning of Russia’s turn towards integration with the Silk Road Economic Belt after a period of predominantly cautious and even alarmist assessments in 2014. Another important source of information for conclusions on the nature of the expert discourse is analytical and publicistic articles printed in *Ekspert*, *Kommersant*, *Vedomosti*, and other media (the most important ones are listed in the References section below).

Attempts to classify the wide array of opinions regarding the “Belt and Road” initiative in the Russian academic and expert circles lead us to the conclusion that such classification will most likely be very tentative and based on two key criteria: 1) What the “Belt and Road” initiative essentially is, or to be more precise, whether *there is more geopolitics or economics to it*; and 2) How the “Belt and Road” initiative affects national interests, or rather whether *it creates more risks or opportunities*.

As has been mentioned above, the discourse on the “Belt and Road” initiative in Russia has drifted away from the original Chinese narrative to become part of the domestic political discussions aimed at assessing Russia’s place in the world. This happened largely because China had not specified the essence and goals of its initiative when it launched it in public domain. This partly explains why there is no uniform opinion in Russia either on the territorial coverage of the Chinese initiative or its substance.

Some experts, citing Chinese documents, mention concrete countries “participating” in the initiative. Others name whole regions or the entire Eurasian continent. The most radical way to put it would be “the geographical limits of the ‘Belt and Road’ initiative are infinite” (survey materials, March 2017).

The spatial perception is closely connected with the understanding of the initiative’s substance. Some experts regard it mainly as an infra-

structure (transport) project and therefore link it to concrete transport corridors which connect China and Europe. Others take a broader view and single out investment, humanitarian and, last but not least, geopolitical aspects.

All Russian experts agree that the initiative encompasses the post-Soviet space, primarily Russia and former Soviet Central Asian republics. There is a firm opinion that its implementation will inevitably strengthen China's influence in this region. However, experts' attitude towards this varies.

In the international discussion the most prominent is probably the opinion offered by experts grouping around the Valdai Club (S. Karaganov, T. Bordachev, I. Makarov, and others, with V. Kashin, K. Kokarev, S. Luzyanin, A. Lukin, and V. Petrovsky sharing some of their views). The conceptual document which reflects their stance on the “Belt and Road” initiative is the aforementioned report (Valdai Club, 2015), which assesses the Silk Road Economic Belt as an important factor for changing the entire global geopolitics. They are convinced that Russia should retain its role as a regional leader in Central Asia, and that integration with the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) is not an obstacle but a facilitating factor. The underlying idea is that “Russia's national development goals do not require a conflict with China over Central Asia (and vice versa)” (Bordachev, 2015). Potential instability in Central Asia is generally referred to as “an ideal common challenge” which brings Russia and China together through shared interests (Bordachev, 2016).

Alarmists take the “Belt and Road” initiative just as seriously, but they view Beijing's actions not as an opportunity but as a *threat* to Russia's interests. They believe that China's ultimate goal is territorial and economic expansion, including into the post-Soviet space. While contemplating Russia's response, these experts put emphasis on national defense issues. The only well-known representative of this group is A. Khramchikhin, but similar views are held by a considerable part of experts among journalists, public figures, and even politicians.

In-between these two extremes stands a large and heterogeneous group of pundits who represent academic circles and the community

of sinologists. As a rule, they are inclined to explain Beijing's actions by their own interpretation of socioeconomic processes in China, while trying not to overestimate China's possibilities to "rearrange" Eurasia. Perhaps the most influential publications in this group were authored by I. Denisov, M. Korostikov, and A. Larin. Experts in this group believe that China's priority is to solve its own socioeconomic tasks, but "maintaining social stability, which is a priority for the Chinese leadership, is no longer possible without an active foreign policy" (Denisov, 2015b). It is claimed that expansion of Chinese capital is the main purpose of the project (Larin, 2016b, 138), and Russia, with its natural transit potential, should find a matching answer, at least to the transport component of the Silk Road Economic Belt (Petrovsky, 2016, 26).

CHINESE INITIATIVE AS A GEOPOLITICAL REALITY

What makes the Russian discourse on the "Belt and Road" initiative quite distinct (for example, from the discourse in Central Asian countries, Zuenko, 2017b) is that it pays close attention to its geopolitical component. The Chinese initiative is analyzed in the context of Beijing's economic, cultural and even military control over the area. The "Belt and Road" initiative is, therefore, beginning to be seen as a new geopolitical reality which requires an optimal reaction from Russia as a great power.

Different experts draw different geopolitical pictures of the world, but it must be admitted that the prevailing formula used in recent Russian works matches the one offered by the Valdai Club experts. It is based on "the West's strong determination to retain exclusive control of the world and prevent the emergence of a polycentric world order" (Kokarev, 2016, 6). The "Belt and Road" initiative is "the response to the West's attempts to suppress pending changes in the global system of international political and economic relations" (Kokarev, 2016, 6). The authors of these works insist there are irreconcilable contradictions between China and the United States and express confidence that Russian-Chinese "constructive relations" can counterbalance the U.S. domination.

U.S. actions to contain the development of Russia and China are considered a common challenge for Beijing and Moscow (Bordachev 2016). This is what forces China to develop its own integration project in Eurasia. According to “neo-Eurasianists,” the project gives Russia and China a chance for integration and breathes new life into previous platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Yakunin, 2016). The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is considered the basis for China’s cooperation in the post-Soviet space. These experts believe that bilateral formats of cooperation with China are counterproductive and even harmful. For example, T. Bordachev says that “the greatest threat to the [EEU-SREB – Ed.] coupling and Eurasian integration comes from the division of the work into unconnected and uncoordinated national lines of integration with Beijing. <...> It is necessary to bring it home to the Chinese partners over and over again that the EEU-China format is the central one and is not limited solely to trade relations. EEU partners should be reminded that as relatively small and weak states they could benefit the most from the multilateral format.” (Bordachev, 2015).

The same expert also says that “the security of consumption, health and life is not yet the strong side of the Chinese development model, and harmonization with China can be possible only if it adopts EEU regulations (Bordachev, 2015). But this is not the limit to Russia’s possible contribution to cooperation within the framework of the Chinese initiative. Russia can become “a security provider” in the “Belt and Road” area (Bordachev, 2017). Russia can offer to be a “buffer” for China, its strong and reliable backyard, thus giving Beijing free rein in its oceanic rivalry with the United States (Yakunin, 2016, 8). Russia can also share its experience of integration in the Russian-language post-Soviet space, because “due to the Asian mentality of Chinese partners and their lack of experience in carrying out large-scale geostrategic plans, progress will be much slower than Russia would prefer” (Bordachev, 2015).

Shortly before the “Greater Eurasian Partnership” concept came into being, Russian experts wrote: “The attempt to bring three abutting projects—EEU, SCO, and SREB—closer together is important for

Russia's national interests in Eurasia as it will make it possible for Russia to form a long-term Eurasian policy. <...> The Shanghai Cooperation Organization should act as a bridge" (Yakunin, 2016, 59). Such strengthening of the SCO in terms of classical geopolitics is presented as a reinforcement of the Russian-Chinese (Eurasian) version of heartland (Yakunin, 2016, 76).

Interestingly, Russia's emphasis on multilateral organizations (EEU, SCO) is at variance with how Central Asian states view cooperation with China. They favor bilateral formats where they would be able to conduct their own dialogue rather than speechlessly observe the dialogue between "the two great powers" (Zuenko, 2018).

The geopolitical component in the perception of the "Belt and Road" initiative has gained more weight in light of the events that occurred in Russia in 2014-2015: "the Crimean crisis," the dramatic fall of the ruble, and anti-Russian sanctions. This distorted the discourse for the sake of ideological needs. It drifted away from the original Chinese narrative and was used to articulate foreign policy ideologemes important for Moscow's efforts to assert itself as one of the centers of the world order and regain the status of great power. The authors believe that the geopolitical component continues to have a decisive influence on the content of the "Belt and Road" discourse and was the key factor in making the decision in May 2015 to "couple" the EEU and SREB. But then this decision would hardly have been possible without economic considerations.

THE CHINESE INITIATIVE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The "Belt and Road" discourse evolved at a time when Russia was struggling with the mounting economic crisis. Faced with economic problems and barred from Western financial instruments, Russia could not but turn its eyes upon China, which had come to be seen over the past decades of rapid growth as a rich and generous investor. China's actions (creation of the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, numerous statements by government officials of different ranks) seemed to bear that out. The subsequent

period of 2015-2018 passed in expectation of Chinese investments in key infrastructure projects, which, however, never came.

Estimating Chinese investment in Russia is the subject of heated methodological debates. It would not be an exaggeration to say that there are no objective data to clarify the issue. There are several reasons for that, primarily changes in the statistical calculation method made in 2014 and the shadowy nature of a large portion of Chinese investments in Russia (intended to pass as those made by Russian companies or coming from offshore areas). However, a major part of real Chinese investments in Russia go into small and medium-size businesses (Ivanov S., 2016), while large “flagship” projects in high-tech industries are practically nonexistent (with the exception of Chinese investments in the Yamal LNG enterprise in 2013-2015). But in our study we focused not so much on the volumes and areas of investment (this issue clearly requires separate research) as on the nature of expectations with regard to Chinese funding associated with the “Belt and Road” initiative.

These expectations were focused on three areas: 1) creating new transport and logistics infrastructure to link Europe and Asia via Russia, 2) attracting direct Chinese investments in high-tech industries, and 3) engaging China (through investments, loans or technologies) in the implementation of projects that use new instruments for the development of the Russian Far East (the free port of Vladivostok, advanced development territories).

All experts agreed that investment cooperation with China could only be possible on terms favorable for the host country, which meant attracting Chinese partners in high-tech enterprises in the first place. Among the ultimate goals they named “reducing dependency on raw materials” and “expanding the logistics infrastructure of the Far East and the Northern Sea Route” (Kokarev, 2016: 105).

On the whole, available materials provide surprisingly few examples of *concrete* projects where Chinese investments could be used. Instead, experts, as a rule, referred to purely abstract “hope for investment.” The only exception was the proposed Moscow-Kazan high-speed rail project, which subsequently could have been ex-

tended to Yekaterinburg, Astana, and Beijing (Eurasia High-Speed Railway).

Some experts (and most of the laymen) continue to see the transport and logistics component as the main substance of the “Belt and Road” initiative. However, we believe this is not so and the “Belt and Road” initiative is essentially *a comprehensive and multifaceted idea of co-development of an infinite number of countries on the basis of interaction with Chinese capital*. But what is true, though, is that references to the Great Silk Road, used by the Chinese leaders from the very beginning, lead the public to associate the “Belt and Road” initiative mainly with transportation projects. This is why the Moscow-Kazan high-speed rail line with a possible extension to China has fit well into public expectations from cooperation with SREB and, in fact, has become “a flagship project” of the “Belt and Road” initiative in Russia.

However, the Moscow-Kazan high-speed rail project has so far failed to produce “a success story” that would push forward the prolonged prelude in Russian-Chinese investment cooperation. The memorandum of cooperation for the construction of the Moscow-Kazan high-speed rail line was signed in October 2014. Yet at the end of 2018 the road was still being designed and the Russian and Chinese partners were still arguing over the terms of financing and some of the technological issues. A combination of excessive expectations from China and unwillingness to accept the terms which Russian experts consider unfavorable (in most cases absolutely justifiably) is more or less typical for all Russian-Chinese infrastructure projects, which complicates their implementation and at the same time increases disappointment among experts about the lack of visible progress in cooperation with China within the framework of the “Belt and Road” initiative.

As can be seen from the above, the discourse on the “Belt and Road” initiative as an economic development instrument was largely associated with rather abstract hopes for outside assistance, which became even stronger in the context of foreign policy and economic developments in 2014-2017. The hopes reached their peak when the agreement was made in May 2015 to “couple” the EEU and SREB. And yet, the perception of the “Belt and Road” initiative as a potential

threat to Russian interests never disappeared from the discourse either before or after that.

THE CHINESE INITIATIVE AS A CHALLENGE. PRO ET CONTRA

Practically all works analyzing the “Belt and Road” initiative use the same algorithm. In the beginning they substantiate participation in the Chinese initiative and then make an important reservation: *participation is possible only if certain conditions are met*. The “pro” arguments are general and sometimes even philosophical in nature (“it is better to cooperate than not to cooperate”), while the “contra” arguments are quite concrete and cannot be ignored.

So what are the challenges? They can be divided into two categories: economic and geopolitical.

Experts who view SREB as a transport and infrastructure project voiced concern from the very beginning that “the Silk Road will bypass Russia” and trans-continental transport corridors will go through neighboring countries and even along some exotic routes (for example, across the Caspian Sea, via Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. The low efficiency of these routes is analyzed in: Zuenko, 2016). There were also concerns that future Chinese investments would go into projects in the European part of Russia to the detriment of Siberia and the Russian Far East, which would eventually lead to a degradation of the Trans-Siberian Railway and the Baikal-Amur Mainline (Petrovsky, 2016: 41).

If the “Belt and Road” initiative is viewed broader, above all, as an opportunity for investment cooperation, it must be said that not all Chinese investments are good for Russia. For example, Russian experts are quite critical of tied loans to be lobbied by China regardless of whether they can benefit the national economy of the recipient country or not (Bordachev, 2015).

In real life, China always insists on some “government guarantees” when negotiating investments. Receiving Chinese investments against such guarantees would mean that even if a project becomes loss-making, it will have to be paid for anyway. According to one of the interviewed Russian experts, since most infrastructure projects in

Russia are money-losing (due to scarce population and small size of the market), this will essentially mean that Russia will support China's foreign economic expansion and the modernization of the Chinese economy at its own expense (survey materials, March 2017).

The overwhelming majority of experts consider it undesirable or even absolutely unacceptable to draw Chinese investments which require predominant use of Chinese equipment and workers or transfer of Chinese production facilities to post-Soviet countries.

Experts believe that the implementation of the Chinese initiative is a geopolitical challenge as it will result in the loss by Russia of its influence in Central Asia. Some Russian experts go further and say that China will also force Russia out of another strategic region—Eastern Europe. Andrei Vinogradov writes: “Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Greece, Slovenia, and Romania, one by one are joining the camp of Euroskeptics who are deeply dissatisfied with their position in the European Union. However, they are drifting not towards their old partner, Russia, but towards China. <...> The Chinese initiative will create risks for Russia by causing it to lose its influence in Ukraine, the Baltic States and even Belarus since China, unlike Russia, is ready to pay in the form of both loans and investments in industry which is necessary for stabilizing the economic situation in European countries” (Petrovsky, 2016: 205).

The cautious attitude towards opportunities and risks coming from China, so typical for the Russian expert community, creates a situation where the pro et contra balance all too often leads to delays or downright sabotage of agreements in Russia, but also in China, due to objective differences in their interests.

In fact, Russia would like to see generous Chinese investments in high-tech industries, with maximum localization of production and use of local resources. China, for its part, wants the opposite as it seeks to implement its “Belt and Road” initiative for the sole purpose of employing its own excess production capacities and workforce.

Russian Ambassador to China Andrei Denisov has put it this way: “China has everything done smoothly and quickly with those partners who use its full-cycle projects: Chinese technologies, materials, labor,

etc. We do not need this as we have our own technologies. And we will not do anything to our own detriment. There must be a different approach: measure twice and cut once. So we are measuring for the time being. <...> Russia will not do anything that does not benefit it” (Korostikov, 2017a).

The problem is that practically all projects involving China appear to be unbeneficial due to both imaginary and real risks. So despite the political background and existing agreements, Russia’s participation in the “Belt and Road” initiative has so far produced quite modest economic results. This fact was actively acknowledged in the discourse throughout 2017 and 2018 and led to a number of critical publications (Beznosyuk, Gabuev, 2017; Denisov, 2017; Korostikov, 2017b; Korostikov, 2018; and others).

EVOLUTION OF THE DISCOURSE. PERCEPTION AND POLITICAL DECISIONS

On the whole, the Russian discourse has evolved along the following tracks: 1) caution / curiosity; 2) interest / awareness of the need to cooperate; 3) disappointment.

The initial stage covered a span of 2013-2014 and ended when the leadership of the country started to send clear signals indicating its readiness to participate in the Chinese initiative.

In January 2015, in the run-up to Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov’s visit to the Boao Forum for Asia, Moscow formulated the key principles of its future Eurasian policy. (This happened amid deteriorating relations with the West less than a year after the reincorporation of Crimea and aggravation of the situation in the east of Ukraine.)

These principles were then formalized in the aforementioned Valdai Club report published in March 2015 (Valdai Club, 2015). It is noteworthy that the report, like all the previous conceptual documents from the “Russia’s pivot to the East” period, was titled “Toward the Great Ocean,” even though its focus was shifted from the coastal area (East Asia) to the continent.

In May 2015, the decision was adopted to “couple” the EEU with SREB. In 2015-2016 the positive agenda generated by the leadership

of the country and experts close to it practically took over the caution observed in the initial stage (to be more precise, it forced it to the sidelines of public discussion, leaving it entirely to marginalized media).

However, starting in late 2016, the expert community became increasingly disappointed at the lack of quick results from the “coupling.” In 2017, this disappointment spilled into a series of somewhat skeptical articles released by all leading think tanks in Russia.

Finally, references to the “Belt and Road” in Russia’s integration agenda were gradually replaced with the Greater Eurasian Partnership concept presented as “the integration of integrations” and encompassing the “Belt and Road” initiative. Nevertheless, at the level of narrative, it is not identical to the Chinese initiative.

The influence of the discourse on political decisions is a debatable issue. However, the substance of the expert discourse, which remained quite skeptical and cautious even when the “Belt and Road” initiative was at the peak of its popularity, cannot but impact the position of the authorities.

The leadership of Russia clearly benefitted from demonstrating its constructive attitude towards the Chinese initiative. This demonstration made both Moscow’s foreign policy “opponents” and Russian people believe that existing problems would be solved at the Chinese partners’ expense. Hopes for large-scale Chinese assistance have not come true so far, but this does not mean that the Russian leadership has not achieved its goals.

Having achieved them, the leadership has assumed a balanced and cautious position. The economic agenda is still actively discussed, but Russia is not taking any steps that would violate its clearly defined interests. The Greater Eurasian Partnership concept as Russia’s conceptual answer to the Chinese “Belt and Road” initiative largely copies Beijing’s approaches. It is vague and elusive, which makes it possible to fill it with any substance, fearing no consequences, and boost its own image, taking no risks whatsoever. The principled position assumed by the Russian side when negotiating joint projects with China and negative tendencies in the Chinese economy make one wonder if Chinese investments will ever come at all. Yet even this is unlikely to ruin

the “integration façade” which at this point benefits both Russia and China and which is based on the geopolitical, rather than economic, understanding of the “Belt and Road” concept.

CONCLUSION

The Russian discourse is volatile and multifaceted. However, its common features include close attention to the geopolitical component and possible risks posed by the initiative. It can be assumed that the substance of the expert discourse influenced political decisions through direct contacts with the political elite and indirectly through mass media and public forums, and to a lesser extent through academic publications.

In 2014-2015, a dire time for Russia due to the economic crisis and confrontation with the West, Russia tried to reap geopolitical and economic benefits from engagement in China’s ambitious initiative. The Russian state used participation in the “Belt and Road” initiative most effectively for boosting its image (globally and domestically) and advancing its views on the development of world politics: polycentric world order, integration in the post-Soviet space, and reduction of Western influence. What mattered most was the demonstration itself, not concrete results.

As for the implementation of concrete economic projects as part of the “Belt and Road” initiative, they became dependent on the pro et contra balance, which, according to Russian researchers, is not conducive to cooperation for the time being. “Gains and prospects” are abstract and even philosophical, while “risks and threats,” on the contrary, are quite concrete and cannot be ignored, given the general bias towards protectionism and nationalism prevailing in society and the political elite.

In this situation, the best possible option for the leadership of the country would be preserving the façade of “imitated integration” at both national and regional levels. The point is that the leadership tends to declare commitment to cooperation and even integration but prefers not to force them. Put crudely, “imitated integration” means that you say the right words about the development of the economy

and cooperation but at the same time you always expect some nasty trick and try to cover your bases.

When relations with the West improve or world oil and gas prices change, which will allow Russia to get over the economic crisis, Moscow will become even less flexible at the talks on certain projects of the “Belt and Road” initiative.

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