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Eurasian Regionalism as a Research Agenda

*Interview with Dr. MIKHAIL A. MOLCHANOV,
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Abstract. Mikhail Aleksandrovich Molchanov is a prominent Canadian political scholar, professor and publicist. He has worked as a senior policy analyst for the Government of Canada and a professor of political science at several Canadian universities. He held a visiting professor appointment at the American University of Sharjah, UAE, and several visiting research appointments at the United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies, Waseda University and Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo, Japan, and at the United Nations University Institute of Comparative Regional Studies (UNU-CRIS) in Brugge, Belgium.

Dr. Molchanov's research focuses on international relations in Eurasia and international political economy of regional integration. His research projects have been supported by the United States Institute of Peace, The Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS), the United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies (UNU-IAS), Japan Foundation, Soros Foundations, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the New Brunswick Innovation Foundation. In 2011, he was awarded the Japan Foundation's prestigious Japanese Studies Fellowship, and in 2012, elected Foreign Member of the National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine. He is the winner of the inaugural Robert H. Donaldson prize of the International Studies Association for the best paper study of the post-communist region. He sits on the Board of the Global and International Studies Program, University of Salamanca, Spain.

Dr. Molchanov has published extensively on comparative politics and international relations of the post-communist states. He has authored and co-authored 7 books and nearly 120 articles and book chapters, including, most recently, *Eurasian Regionalisms and Russian Foreign Policy* [Molchanov 2016a], and *Management Theory for Economic Systems* [Molchanov, Molchanova 2018], as well as *Eurasian Regionalism: Ideas and Practices* [Molchanov 2015], *Russia's Leadership of Regional Integration in Eurasia* [Molchanov 2016b], *The Eurasian Economic Union* [Molchanov 2018a], *New Regionalism and Eurasia* [Molchanov 2018b], *Russian Security Strategy*



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and the Geopolitics of Energy in Eurasia [Molchanov 2019], and *Eurasian Regionalisms and Russia's Pivot to the East: The Role of ASEAN* [Molchanov 2014].

In his interview Dr. Molchanov talks about the formation of Eurasian studies in the U.S., Europe and the post-Soviet states, leading scientists in this area and periodicals. Special attention is paid to the perception of the Eurasian space in Western countries, to the prospects for further institutionalization of the Eurasian Economic Union, to the partnership between Russia and China and to Russia — EU relations.

Key words: Eurasia, Eurasian regionalism, Eurasian regional integration, regional studies, Russian foreign policy, Sino-Russian relations, Russian-Ukrainian relations

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Евразийский регионализм как исследовательское поле

*Интервью с МИХАИЛОМ АЛЕКСАНДРОВИЧЕМ МОЛЧАНОВЫМ,
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Михаил Александрович Молчанов — ведущий канадский политолог, профессор и публицист. Профессор Молчанов — международно признанный исследователь посткоммунистической Евразии с многолетним опытом работы в системе высшего образования, исследовательском и научно-практическом сообществах за рубежом. С 1994 г. он преподает в университетах Канады. В течение ряда лет М.А. Молчанов занимал позиции старшего аналитика в системе органов государственной службы Канады. В качестве приглашенного профессора он преподавал в Американском университете Шарджи (ОАЭ) и Университете Саламанки (Испания) и занимался исследовательской работой в Университете ООН, Васеда, Аойяма Гакуин (Токио), а также в Институте сравнительных региональных исследований Университета ООН в г. Брюгге, Бельгия.

Исследовательские проекты профессора Молчанова посвящены международным отношениям в Евразии и международной политической экономии региональной интеграции. В разное время его исследования были поддержаны присуждаемыми на конкурсной основе грантами таких организаций, как Институт Мира США, Совет Евро-Атлантического Партнерства НАТО, Институт сравнительного регионоведения Университета ООН, Институт перспективных исследований Университета ООН, Японский Фонд, Фонд Сороса, Совет по общественным и гуманитарным наукам Канады и Инновационный фонд Провинции Нью-Брунсуик. В 2011 г. д-р Молчанов стал лауреатом престижной стипендии для поощрения исследований в области японоведения, присуждаемой Японским фондом. В 2012 г. он был избран иностранным членом Национальной Академии педагогических наук Украины. Д-ру Молчанову присуждена первая после учреждения премия Ассоциации международных исследований им. Роберта Доналдсона за лучшую работу по изучению посткоммунистического региона.

Профессором Молчановым опубликовано множество работ по сравнительной политологии и международным отношениям посткоммунистических государств. Его перу принадлежит 7 книг, автором или соавтором которых он является, и свыше 120 научных статей и глав в научных изданиях. Среди недавно изданного — монографии «Евразийские регионализмы и внешняя политика России» [Molchanov 2016a] и «Теория управления экономическими системами» [Molchanov, Molchanova 2008], а также главы о российской стратегии безопасности и о Евразийском экономическом союзе, написанные, соответственно, для «Справочника Раутледж по безопасности России» [Molchanov 2019] и «Справочника Раутледж по российской внешней политике» [Molchanov 2018a]. По евразийской проблематике написаны также «Евразийские регионализмы и центр России на Востоке: роль АСЕАН» [Molchanov 2014], «Евразийский регионализм: идеи и практика» [Molchanov 2015], «Российское лидерство в региональной интеграции в Евразии» [Molchanov 2016b], «Новый регионализм для Евразии» [Molchanov 2018b] и другие работы.

В своем интервью М.А. Молчанов рассказывает о становлении евразийских исследований в США, Европе и постсоветских государствах, ведущих ученых данного направления и периодических изданиях. Отдельное внимание уделяется восприятию евразийского пространства в западных странах, перспективам дальнейшей институционализации ЕАЭС, партнерству РФ с Китаем и отношениям РФ — ЕС.

Ключевые слова: Евразия, евразийский регионализм, евразийская региональная интеграция, региональные исследования, российская внешняя политика, российско-китайские отношения, российско-украинские отношения

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— **Last year, the Eurasian Economic Union celebrated its 5th anniversary. You are deeply immersed in the studies of current problems of the region; you are also well-informed of the latest research on this issue. To what extent, in your opinion, have the studies of Eurasian issues and problems got developed in the West?**

— Until very recently, Eurasian studies in the West have been virtually non-existent. That is, if we do not count works belonging to geology and ecology. The journal “Europe-Asia Studies”¹, albeit its name invited to think otherwise, was not much engaged in Eurasian studies per se. I’ve counted only 5 titles bearing the word “Eurasia” or “Eurasian” published there before 2012. Of course, researchers used the term in publications focusing on the post-Soviet region or the well-known trend in the Russian émigré thought, yet works of a more reflexive nature, where “Eurasia” and “Eurasian” politics would be used in a conceptually meaningful way and not just as a shorthand for the former Soviet Union, were few and far between. I recall talking to Amitav Acharya back in 2008, who was cautious to use the term then, seeing it as little more than a convenient designation of the former USSR. Strictly speaking, before Journal of Eurasian Studies published its first issue in 2010 [Gleason 2010], the field had no dedicated periodical.

— **Whom of professional researchers involved in the studies of Eurasian integration**

¹ Europe-Asia Studies is an academic peer-reviewed journal, until 1992 it was called “Soviet Studies”. The journal is published by the Institute of Central and Eastern European Studies, University of Glasgow and covers current political, social and economic affairs of the former communist countries of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and Asia. URL: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ceas20/current>. (*Editor’s note*).

would you single out? What kind of people are they? Who prevails among them: Russians or maybe Ukrainians, Poles? What research organizations do they represent: academic and scientific research institutions or think tanks?

— To continue with the previous question, it is not an exaggeration to say that Eurasian regionalization studies in the West have been pioneered by non-westerners: either immigrant academics from the former Soviet Union or the Russian scholars publishing in English and other western languages. I would single out Evgeny Vinokurov² and Alexander Libman³ [Vinokurov, Libman 2012; Libman, Vinokurov 2012], who had contributed a whole string of publications that have transformed Eurasian regional integration studies into a subfield of international political economy. The western scholars who were most influential in popularizing Eurasia as a term, and sometimes also as a concept, were mostly Americans. The names of S. Frederick Starr [1994], Gregory Gleason [2010], Martha Brill Olcott [Olcott, Aslund, Garnett 1999], and Marlene [Laruelle 2008] come to mind first.

Eurasian studies started to pick up after 2012 and snowballed after the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union was signed in 2014⁴. The scholars involved come from a

² Evgeny Vinokurov — Russian economist, professor of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Deputy Director, Chief economist of the Eurasian Stabilization and Development Fund since 2018. In 2011—2018 he was Director of the Centre for Integration Studies, Eurasian Development Bank. (*Editor’s note*).

³ Alexander Libman — Professor of Social Sciences and Eastern European Studies at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich and a Principal Investigator at the Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies (LMU Munich and University of Regensburg). (*Editor’s note*).

⁴ The Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union is effective // Eurasian Economic Commission. January 1,

variety of countries and world regions. Dmitri Trenin directs the Carnegie Moscow Center, Andrei Tsygankov teaches in the USA⁵, Richard Sakwa — in Britain⁶. Piotr Dutkiewicz is a professor of political science in Canada [Dutkiewicz, Sakwa 2015], Emilian Kavalski [Kavalski, Cho 2018] — in Australia. David Lane and Vsevolod Samokhvalov [Lane, Samokhvalov 2015] are both researchers at Cambridge University. Of course, there are many Russian researchers actively involved in the field. I should mention G.I. Chufrin [2013], A.A. Kazantsev [Kazantsev, Gusev 2018], M.L. Lagutina [Lagutina, Mikhaylenko 2020], A.V. Obydenkova [Obydenkova, Libman 2019], A.A. Sushentsov [Sushentsov, Silaev 2018], N.A. Vasilyeva, A.I. Nikitin, A.V. Lukin and many others⁷.

Together with the Eurasian Development Bank's Centre for Integration Studies, MGIMO University, IMEMO RAS and SPbSU, your own University emerged as a prominent center of Eurasian studies in Russia. The publication of a comprehensive reference textbook *Foreign Policies of the CIS States* [Degterev, Kurylev 2019] last year is a huge step in propagating Eurasian studies in the West.

A solid representation for Eurasian studies can be found, as you might expect, in Kazakhstan. Allow me to mention Murat Laumulin [2009], Lyailya Nurgaliyeva [2015], Ikboljon Qoraboyev [2010], Nargis Kassenova [2013] and Kairat Moldashev [Moldashev, Hassan 2017; Moldashev, Qoraboyev 2018].

Polish scholars of note include Katarzyna Czerewacz-Filipowicz [2019], Agnieszka Konopelko [Czerewacz-Filipowicz, Konopelko 2017], Iwona Wiśniewska [2013], Krzysztof

Falkowski [2018], and Marcin Kaczmarek [Kaczmarek 2017; Jakobowski, Popławski, Kaczmarek 2018], who is now based in the UK.

Eurasian studies in Ukraine are presently unpopular, although there are still several brave scholars who are pursuing them currently as an academic, rather than propagandistic or purely ideological, endeavor.

— From the point of view of their assessments, could we possibly talk about an adequate and undistorted by prejudice Western perception of the processes taking place in the Eurasian space? What positions seem to be prevailing: those accusing Moscow of neo-imperialistic, hegemonic ambitions, or those viewing the Euroasian Economic Union (EEU) as a tool for the economic development of its members? Are the authors' opinions affected by Russophobia that gained ground in the West?

— Most of the articles I read are professional. The ideas, à-la Hillary Clinton, that the Eurasian Economic Union is just “a move to re-Sovietize the region”, belong to political propaganda and should be treated accordingly⁸. Of course, there are differences in the emphasis between geopolitical and political-economic analyses. International relations specialists focusing on geopolitics tend to think in terms of power projection, spheres of interest, politics of alliances and zero-sum games. This is an intellectual staple for the school of realism in international relations theory in all of its modern varieties: offensive and defensive, neostructural and neoclassic. We should not blame them for their focus on power differentials and hegemony in international relations, regional hegemony included. There are a number of interesting works in this genre, specifically those focusing on the relative loss of Russia's influence in Central Asia and the corresponding regional advance of China's political and economic interests [Lo 2008; Cooley 2012].

2015. URL: <http://www.eurasiancommission.org/en/nae/news/Pages/01-01-2015-1.aspx> (accessed: 01.08.2020).

⁵ Andrei Tsygankov — a guest editor of this issue and a member of the editorial board of Vestnik RUDN. International Relations. (*Editor's note*).

⁶ Richard Sakwa — a member of the editorial board of Vestnik RUDN. International Relations. (*Editor's note*).

⁷ Papers by A.A. Kazantsev [Kazantsev, Gusev 2018], M.L. Lagutina [Lagutina, Mikhaylenko 2020] and A.A. Sushentsov [Sushentsov, Silaev 2018] were published earlier at Vestnik RUDN. International Relations. (*Editor's note*).

⁸ Clinton Calls Eurasian Integration an Effort To 'Re-Sovietize' // Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. December 07, 2012. URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/clinton-calls-eurasian-integration-effort-to-resovietize/24791921.html> (accessed: 01.04.2020).

On the other hand, the works on regional economic integration proper belong to a subfield of international political economy. Their focus is, by definition, on the economic development of the region, foreign economic policies of the participant countries, economic cooperation, trade, and coordination of policies. As these scholars are much less preoccupied with the analysis of mass media and much more — with the statistics of foreign trade and investment, whatever criticism of the Eurasian economic integration they might have would probably be along the lines of a distorted balance of trade, the lack of investment and the underdevelopment of institutions, rather than someone's neoimperialism or hegemony.

It is hard for me to evaluate the degree of the Russophobic bias affecting academic literature on the problem, but I would venture to say that this bias is easier to identify in the studies that owe their intellectual pedigree to the geopolitical tradition of scholarship and the sadly revived exploits in Kremlinology⁹. Among the relatively recent specimens of this genre the works by the late Zbigniew Brzezinski [2016] remain quite influential. As for the historic roots and modern manifestations of this unfortunate trend, A. Tsygankov's *Russophobia* [Tsygankov 2009] provides an excellent analysis.

— **Let us talk about structuring of the international community of Eurasian researchers and the debate that is taking place**

⁹ Kremlinology (Sovietology) is an interdisciplinary branch of complex social studies studying the Soviet Union and its system, society, economy and culture. It originated in the USA and Western Europe during the Cold War and the confrontation with the USSR. Main Kremlinological (Soviet studies) centers: Harriman Institute at Columbia University (New York, USA); Hoover Institution for War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford University (San Francisco, USA); Davis Center at Harvard University (Cambridge, USA); Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Washington, DC, USA); Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies (CREES) of the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor, MI); Institute for Eastern European Studies (Fribourg, Switzerland); Federal Institute for Eastern and International Studies (Cologne, Germany); Institute for the Study of History and Culture of the USSR (Munich, Germany); RFE/RL and others. (*Editor's note*).

within the International Studies Association (ISA) to transform the POSTCOMM section into a Eurasian and to form a regional conference (as they have already done with the Latin American one). Or maybe Russia should create such a community in the CIS space (the Russian International Studies Association (RISA) now has mostly Russian researchers). Or the community is already well structured within already existing Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES)?

— The ISA section that is currently called post-Communist Systems in International Relations (POSTCOMM) used to be called the “Soviet Studies” section. During the times of the Cold War it was quite influential beyond the boundaries of the ISA itself. After the end of the USSR, the section had to be renamed. As the whole Soviet bloc was now history, and certain common problems of the post-communist transition emerged, the section reorganized itself as the Post-Communist States in International Relations. Somehow along the way during one of the periodic rechartering exercises “states” was replaced with “systems”. That did not solve the main problem with the new name, however.

Several section members have criticized the choice of the “post-communist” as the section's identifier. They argued that the variety of states we study should not be defined predominantly by their common historical legacies. We do not lump Japan and France together as “post-feudal” states, that would be ridiculous. Besides, just as the “communist states” was a misnomer (the only “communist” feature about them was the rule by the communist party), so the “post-communist” terminology sounded both imprecise and shallow. Given that the idea of “post-communism” has been criticized by some as indefensibly narrow and “backward looking”, proposals for renaming of the section have been circulating since the early 2000s.

Well, it is easier to understand one's flaws than to eliminate them. One of the proposals on how to deal with the increasingly anachronistic name of the section was to rename it geographically, and the term “Eurasian” has

indeed been suggested. However, there are problems with this idea, too. International relations theorists tend to shy away from structuring international relations analysis of modern polities into “post-industrial” and “industrializing”, “developed” and “developing” states’ sections. This is an approach more typical for international political sociology. At the ISA, most of the sections are named thematically. The two exceptions are POSTCOMM and the newly formed South Asia in World Politics (SAWP) Section, which was officially chartered by ISA in 2016.

Gregory Gleason is a long-time champion of creating an ISA Eurasia Region that you mentioned. However, this can be done in two very different ways. One way is eliminating the POSTCOMM Section and creating a Region in its place. In my view, such a development would result in a huge loss of prestige for the academic area we represent, the geographic narrowing of currently global community of scholars, parochialization and marginalization of Eurasian studies. In short, transforming POSTCOMM into a Region, thus closing the Section, would be a disaster that must be avoided.

Another way is to create the ISA Eurasia while keeping the POSTCOMM Section, under a new name if need be, among the current thematically oriented units of the Association. I much prefer this option. As they say, the more the merrier. ISA Eurasia (a regional conference) would allow us to expand our geographic representation and coverage and bring in more scholars from the region. This is where RISA could fit it, together with similar associations from other states in the region. Meanwhile, the new Eurasian Studies Section will remain where POSTCOMM currently is, that is, at the core of the ISA. The Section will stir research interest in Russia and Eurasia among the North American and European scholars. Moreover, it will be best positioned to have a truly global reach with a focus on strategically important for the field regions and nations. And, since we have a sort of historic division of labour among the international and US-based academic associations with a particular interest in the region, I don’t think that the beefing up of the Eurasian studies

at the ISA will in any way encroach on the ASEEES’s turf.

— **We are interviewing you in 2020 — this year is marked by the 20th anniversary of Russia’s foreign policy. In 2000, the new President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, came to power. V. Putin formulated the main principles and set priorities for the development of our country’s foreign policy. From the point of view of today — what, in your opinion, are Moscow’s successful achievements in this sphere, and what kind of problems does it encounter?**

— I think attempts to diversify Russia’s political and economic partnerships, which have brought a more or less pronounced pivot to East Asia, China in particular, should be counted among the successful achievements. Of course, there are always caveats. Relations with China could have developed quite differently, and more to Russia’s advantage, had Russia progressed with a domestic economic reform, encouraged venture entrepreneurship and diversified exports more than it did.

Russia’s return to the epicentre of the world politics by turning the tide of the war in Syria is yet another obvious example. Generally speaking, the more the country engages with its partners and allies, the better. This includes both economic and military-political engagements. Restoration of Russia’s status in Latin America¹⁰, proactive engagement with India¹¹ and comprehensive development of ties with a number of East Asian states [Gorenburg, Schwartz 2019] are all steps in the right direction. Both international and regional strategies of foreign policy are important tools in the advancement of Russia’s interests abroad.

The problems that Russia currently encounters, apart from the Covid-19 pandemics

¹⁰ Regional Deep Dive: Latin America // Carnegie Endowment. URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/global-russia/latinamerica> (accessed: 01.04.2020).

¹¹ ‘Close friends’ Putin and Modi vow to boost military, trade ties // GulfNews. September 04, 2019. URL: <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/india/close-friends-putin-and-modi-vow-to-boost-military-trade-ties-1.66207091> (accessed: 01.04.2020).

that grips the world, all stem from 2014 and the incorporation of Crimea. The biggest of those is deterioration of Russia's relations with the West. The close second is deterioration in Russia's relations with its former Soviet neighbours. Achieving a lasting accommodation with Ukraine on the basis of a permanent solution to the Donbass crisis seems to be a number one task of the day. Forging a stable, mutually advantageous relationship with Belarus and Kazakhstan is yet another task that would require much political attention, and a significant outlay of resources. If Belarus or Kazakhstan are not convinced of very real economic benefits of their membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, the collapse of the EAEU becomes only a matter of time.

— **What do you think about the development of the EAEU, its conjugation with the Chinese initiative “One Belt — One Road”, as well as Russia's role in this organization?**

— Last but not least, the proclaimed desire to integrate the EAEU¹² with China's global Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) requires lots and lots of hard work if we are to move beyond the realm of empty declarations. Of course, China has the upper hand in this equation. How to benefit from China's ambitious plans in the region without losing, let's say, strategic initiative — and in a worst-case scenario, parts of national sovereignty — this is the question of paramount importance for Russia's very survival as a global power. Maintaining the Eurasian Economic Union as an independent player and a partner, rather than a stepping stone of China's global ascension, will require more than political will. It will require a surge in Russia's direct investments in the region, a concerted use of soft power, and a willingness to pick up the cost of direct and indirect subsidies to the EAEU partners. Russia should become what scholars of regional integration call a “paymaster” for the region — a role that, for example, Germany has

¹² Dasgupta S. Putin Demands a Role in Eurasian Part of Belt and Road // Voice of America. May 4, 2019. URL: <https://www.voanews.com/europe/putin-demands-role-eurasian-part-belt-and-road> (accessed: 01.04.2020).

played for the European Union through several decades of its existence [Mattli 1999].

I realize that talking about bringing more money to the region against the background of the ongoing economic recession and in a direct sight of a full-blown crisis may sound somewhat outlandish. Unfortunately, the undeniable lesson of the seventy-something years of the postwar regional integration efforts, inclusive with the last three decades of the post-Soviet “Commonwealth” rhetoric, is simply this: if an international institution fails to deliver some tangible benefits to its participants, it either unravels or becomes an empty shell of cooperation promises. I sincerely hope that the Eurasian Economic Union evades this fate.

— **Do you think that nowadays we are witnessing the process of creating the so-called new bipolarity with the participation of the United States and China? What kind of place can Russia take in this configuration of the balance of powers?**

— I am afraid we are witnessing the creation of a new unipolarity with China at its helm. Sure, it is still few years, perhaps decades, away. The United States still has some trump cards (no pun intended) up its sleeve. Unquestionable military superiority is the most obvious one. The global financial hegemony¹³ propped up by the petrodollar¹⁴ is yet another instrument of far-reaching consequences. We can't dismiss the monetary component of hard power. Numerous overlapping networks of the US-controlled global regimes and institutions compensate for growing weaknesses of the American domestic power base.

And yet, over the last quarter century the People's Republic of China has managed to make substantial inroads in this previously

¹³ America's Aggressive Use of Sanctions Endangers the Dollar's Reign // The Economist. January 18, 2020. URL: <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2020/01/18/americas-aggressive-use-of-sanctions-endangers-the-dollars-reign> (accessed: 01.04.2020).

¹⁴ Demise of the Petrodollar and the End of American Power. The Colder War by Marin Katusa // YouTube. November 25, 2014. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmVeDeav0DI> (accessed: 01.04.2020).

unassailable power base. Before the current crisis struck, China was well on its way to become the world's leading economic power by the end of the decade¹⁵. The Covid-19 challenge, which the U.S. has essentially failed in comparison to the better organized China, may, in fact, give a new boost to the process of global hegemonic transition. The China — Russia alliance, which the western sanctions against Russia made all but inevitable, accelerates rearmament of the People's Liberation Army. The current plans to work together on joint lunar (and other space exploration) projects acquire new significance given President Trump's unabashed "opening" of the moon to US private interests. These and related developments allow a more or less confident prediction that China will overtake the USA not only economically, but also militarily, within the next ten-to-fifteen years¹⁶.

Collective efforts of the West to push Russia away and into China's embrace rule out all prospects that a new round of westernization of the Russian foreign policy will come up any time soon. Hence, Russia is destined to remain with China for the foreseeable future. What place will it hold in this partnership — perhaps a junior, but respected partner or a satellite and a resource to exploit — will depend exclusively on the wisdom of the country's leadership and the creative talents of its people. If the Russian political elite will be able to make the right decisions and empower the people in much the same way that Deng Xiaoping did in the early 1980s, Russia may stand a chance. If, on the other hand, few state-supported financial and industrial groups in the extraction industry will remain the principal driving horse of the economy, it will be hard to avoid comparative

peripheralization: first, in global economy, next, in global politics.

— The US presidential elections are to take place soon, and Donald Trump is most likely to keep his place in the White House. On the one hand, his reserved position towards Ukraine is well-known. On the other hand, we see some European elites inclining towards the normalization of the relations with Moscow. Do you think the current situation might prompt the creation of a window of opportunity to manage the conflict in the South-East of Ukraine?

— There are several parts to this question. Let me address them one by one, starting with the United States. The United States is fully absorbed in its internal problems — Covid-19. After the Democratic Party's establishment has, for the second time, betrayed Bernie Sanders, the chances of a Democratic candidate to beat the incumbent President significantly deteriorated. However, and let me stress it again, the next elections will be determined by the present administration's handling of the pandemic to a much larger extent than by your typical party politics. In a sense, they will become a national referendum on Donald Trump's skills and capacities in dealing with a health emergency of heretofore unseen proportions. President Trump's record on this is hardly stellar at the moment, and reaching a tipping point of the scale, when yesterday's supporters will become today's opponents, is very easy. Therefore, let not put all our money on the incumbent president just yet.

Of course, Joe Biden has numerous problems of his own, the state of his own physical and mental health being perhaps the most obvious one¹⁷. The Biden family's involvement in Ukraine's affairs has been flawed on so many dimensions it is hard to pick up one for a discussion. The amazingly suppressed corruption scandal with regard to Hunter Biden's

¹⁵ Martin W. The US Could Lose Its Crown as the World's Most Powerful Economy As Soon As Next Year, and It's Unlikely to Ever Get It Back // Business Insider. January 10, 2019. URL: <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-economy-to-fall-behind-china-within-a-year-standard-chartered-says-2019-1> (accessed: 01.04.2020).

¹⁶ Zilber A. United States Will Drop to Become the World's Third Biggest Economy Behind China and India by 2030, New Financial Rankings Suggest // Daily Mail. January 10, 2019. URL: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6575793/China-worlds-largest-economy-2030-India-surpass-U-S.html> (accessed: 01.04.2020).

¹⁷ Kimberly L., Simonson J. 'Lot of issues': Former Obama Doctor Says Biden 'Not a Healthy Guy' // Washington Examiner. December 19, 2019. URL: <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/lot-of-issues-former-obama-doctor-says-biden-is-not-a-healthy-guy> (accessed: 01.04.2020).

role¹⁸ on the board of the nefarious Burisma company¹⁹ and Joe Biden's brazen — and successful — efforts to press the Ukrainian government into dismissing the Prosecutor General²⁰ engaged into investigating the company's shady deals could, in a regular country, be more than enough to torpedo this candidate's chances of election. America is not your normal, regular country, however Joe Biden may well be the country's next president.

President D. Trump is skeptically predisposed toward Ukraine's dominant nationalist discourse, yet supports what he believes are legitimate aspirations of Ukraine's national sovereignty and the country's privileged relationship with the United States. This will determine his approach to the situation in Ukraine's South-East. It is worth remembering that characterizations of the conflict in Donbass as a "Russian aggression" are *de rigueur* in the American political and academic discourse today, while an alternative analysis of international drivers of that conflict, let alone its characterization as Ukraine's civil war, have been deliberately eschewed by western media. Six years ago, when I tried to draw attention of the Canadian audience to Kiev's bombardments of the Donbass cities and villages, I was essentially cut off mid-air by a program host and practically barred from reappearing on a TV show that used to invite me regularly until then.

It will be difficult, even for the US president, to challenge what might be called a

"party line" of the US-led western discourse on Ukraine's suffering at Russia's hands. Just naming the things with their proper names, like reserving the word "aggression" for a concerted military action of one state against another state, or the term "civil war" — for the armed confrontation of the co-nationals within the same country, is close to impossible when touching upon a subject of the Ukrainian-Russian relations today.

— What is the dynamics of EU — Russia relations in the context of the Ukrainian crisis?

— This Russia-adverse media dynamics is also a factor in Russia relations with the European Union. However, the EU itself has larger problems to deal with at the moment. The Covid-19 crisis, to a much larger extent than Brexit, revealed, I am sorry to say, a deep-reaching hollowness at the core of this international institution. The crisis revealed not only the lack of unity in the EU responses²¹, but the lack of willingness to help a participant country most in need of such help — Italy²². More than anything else, the crisis revealed that the EU's "ever closer union" was nothing more than a federalist dream of a bygone era. The actual EU is, in fact, just the opposite — a poorly coordinated agglomerate of less than mutually supportive, intrinsically nationalistic countries²³.

To speak of a unified position of the EU toward anything of substance, the conflict in Ukraine including, is, therefore, either premature or no longer relevant. The Russian Federation will be well advised to deal with the EU

¹⁸ Murdock D. Hunter Biden's Connection to Burisma Has Been Questioned Before // National Review. January 29, 2020. URL: <https://www.nationalreview.com/2020/01/trump-impeachment-hunter-biden-connection-to-burisma-questioned-before/> (accessed: 01.04.2020).

¹⁹ Heine D. Report: Missing \$1.8 Billion in Aid Linked to Corrupt Oligarch Who 'Bankrolled' Ukraine Revolution // The Tennessee Star. February 9, 2020. URL: <https://tennesseestar.com/2020/02/09/report-missing-1-8-billion-in-aid-linked-to-corrupt-oligarch-who-bankrolled-ukraine-revolution/> (accessed: 01.04.2020).

²⁰ Stern D., Dixon R. Ukraine Court Forces Probe into Biden Role in Firing of Prosecutor Viktor Shokin // The Washington Post. February 27, 2020. URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ukraine-court-forces-probe-into-biden-role-in-firing-of-prosecutor-viktor-shokin/2020/02/27/92710222-5983-11ea-8efd-0f904bdd8057_story.html (accessed: 01.04.2020).

²¹ Fleming S., Khan M. EU Fails to Settle Rifts Over Size and Shape of Recovery Fund' // Financial Times. April 24, 2020. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/cee2c14a-fa59-4684-a335-27cef1260fa6> (accessed: 25.04.2020).

²² Braw E. The EU Is Abandoning Italy in Its Hour of Need // Foreign Policy. March 14, 2020. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/14/coronavirus-eu-abandoning-italy-china-aid/> (accessed: 01.04.2020).

²³ O'Callaghan L. EU on the Brink: Coronavirus Set to Unleash Wave of Nationalism in Test for EU Leaders // Express. April 17, 2020. URL: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1270183/EU-news-Europe-nationalism-end-of-eu-brussels-covid-19-epidemic-spain-Italy-France> (accessed: 25.04.2020).

countries separately, one by one, perhaps in duos, trios and quads, but hardly in any format larger than that. In other words, we are back to the times of bilateral diplomacy and great power politics, although not quite back to the times of the Concert of Europe or the Triple Entente. Specifically on Ukraine, Russia remains the key, if not the only, power capable of assuring some lasting settlement of Ukraine's problems. That is, should Ukraine itself prove it is willing and capable to proceed. The role of the West now, assuming that the collective West is serious about stopping the war in Donbass, which I personally have doubted²⁴, is to apply enough pressure on Kiev — and provide it with enough incentives — to change the Ukrainian elites' calculus toward implementation of the Minsk agreements.

I do not see any alternative to the Minsk process. Although proclaimed dead many times, the Minsk agreements in their essence present a realistic and viable set of policies that could lead Ukraine out of the dead end where it finds itself at the moment. The next year or two may indeed present a unique window of opportunity to reintegrate Donbass in Ukraine on the basis of Ukraine's acknowledgement of Donbass as a society with its own, culturally distinct identity, traditions, political, cultural, and economic rights. Russia needs to assure Ukraine that its national and territorial sovereignty over thusly defined Donbass is not to become diluted by

whatever autonomous privileges Donbass will get in the process. Moreover, Russia will be expected to provide resources necessary for the postwar restoration — simply because no one else will.

If all of this comes to pass, the Crimean issue will remain the only eyesore in the relations between the two countries, yet perhaps the one potentially manageable in not-so-distant future. What is absolutely clear to me, though, is that any improvement in the Ukrainian-Russian relations under the present conditions will require enormous investments of energy, good will and material resources on the part of the Russian leadership. The “sitting on the fence” position will not suffice. Russia needs to become nothing short of Ukraine's largest benefactor and make sure that its benevolent involvement is felt by masses of the Ukrainian people via tangible improvement of their daily lot. Once again, the elite accommodation will not suffice. The Russian-Ukrainian rift has grown too deep to close it with good words and intentions alone in the absence of sustained material help.

To sum it up, I do believe that a window of opportunity to put an end to the conflict in Ukraine's South-East is upon us. The success of this endeavor will depend primarily on the success of the Ukrainian-Russian rapprochement and the two nations' determination to work together on resolving the crisis. The European Union and the United States of America should not be throwing spokes in the wheel. This is the minimum they can do if their concern about Ukraine and Donbass is sincere.

²⁴ Molchanov M. (Un)solving Ukraine's conflict // Open Democracy. July 16, 2015. URL: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/unsolving-ukraines-conflict/> (accessed: 01.04.2020).

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