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Interdisciplinary research workshop ‘Popular geopolitics in Russia and post-Soviet Eastern Europe’, 19–20 February 2015, University College London, London, UK

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An interdisciplinary research workshop on ‘Popular geopolitics in Russia and post-Soviet Eastern Europe’ took place on 19–20 February 2015, hosted by the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) at University College London (UCL) (Figure 1). The event was generously supported by the UCL Centre for Humanities Interdisciplinary Research Projects, the UCL European Institute and the Centre for East European Language-Based Area Studies. ‘Popular geopolitics’ refers to a subfield of Human Geography concerned with the images ordinary citizens have of their state and others and the (re)production of such images in popular culture. It highlights how particular understandings of world politics are embedded and promulgated in various types of media, from cartoons and comic strips to movies, newspapers and magazines. Audiences and their engagement with geopolitical narratives are also a focus of study. Such research falls within the broader literature of critical geopolitics, aimed at deconstructing geopolitical discourse to expose its political deployment.

The literature on popular geopolitics has to date been rooted firmly in Anglophone media and culture. However, the questions it raises have rarely been so salient in the post-Soviet states of Eastern Europe. It was the popular appeal of a ‘European’ future which helped drive the EuroMaidan protests in Ukraine, while popular mistrust of ‘the West’, encouraged by mass media, has become a defining feature of Russian political life under Vladimir Putin. The workshop therefore brought established scholars of popular geopolitics together with scholars of post-Soviet media, politics, societies and culture with the intention of advancing understanding of geopolitical narratives in the post-Soviet region and broadening the geographical and linguistic scope of popular geopolitics as a field of enquiry.

Fifteen papers were presented over two days. The event was opened by Professor David Newman (Ben-Gurion University, Israel), who spoke about the controversial origins of the study of Geopolitics and its subsequent renaissance. Professor Doug Blum (Providence College, USA) then discussed cultural values, meanings and norms in Kazakhstani society that have geopolitical significance. He noted that Kazakhstanis tend to see the world as a place where the strongest states (economically or militarily) come out on top, and that events in Ukraine had sparked heightened insecurity among Kazakhstanis about the prospect of Russian domination. Dr Mikhail Suslov (Uppsala University, Sweden) analysed geopolitical fantasies that have arisen in the Russian-language blogosphere since Crimea’s annexation, with the hashtag #Krymnash as a pivot. Geopolitical narratives in the Donbas were considered by Professor Alexander Osipian (Kramatorsk Institute of Economics and Humanities, Ukraine), who explained how skilful incorporation of local fears and phobias had helped Russian and separatist messages resonate powerfully in the region. Dr Karena Avedissian (University of Birmingham, UK) presented a paper on conservative, patriotic narratives among Russia’s Kuban Cossacks, emphasising their importance to Russian state narratives of Russia’s place in the world. The emergence of ‘Europe’ as a polestar in Ukrainian public discourse was then traced by Dr Dariya Orlova (National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy, Ukraine), before Dr Nelly Bekus (University of Exeter, UK) examined the ambiguous image of Polishness in contemporary Belarusian cultural discourse – in some cultural texts a constructed sense of Poland’s ‘Otherness’ is sustained, while elsewhere Poland’s closeness is emphasised as a means to locate Belarus in Europe. Day two of the workshop began with Professor Robert A. Saunders (Farmingdale State College, USA) and Dr Vlad Strukov (University of Leeds, UK) proposing a framework for interrogating the contribution of Russian popular culture to ‘everyday’ geopolitical understandings. Emphasising

that Russian and 'Western' currents feed into and off each other, they discussed ways in which various producers of cultural artefacts have engaged with the idea of 'Russia' and its geopolitical relationship with external actors.

Three papers concentrated on geopolitical perceptions among Russia's younger generation. Dr Joanna Szostek (UCL SSEES, UK) presented a study of media use and views about the West among Russian university students to demonstrate that support for negative narratives about the EU and USA diminishes (but only slightly) among students who do not get news from state media. Dr Valeria Kasamara (Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia) presented survey results showing the events which make Russian students most proud or ashamed of their country, while Professor Ellen Mickiewicz (Duke University, USA) explored discourse on trust and its (geo)political implications among students at Moscow State University, the Higher School of Economics and the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). Another paper with a focus on education was that of Professor Dr Martin Müller (University of Zürich, Switzerland), who suggested three conceptual cuts for popular geopolitics: consecration, subject-making and neuropolitics, drawing on his ethnographic study at MGIMO. Everyday modes of diplomacy were the focus of a co-authored paper by Professor Magnus Marsden (University of Sussex, UK), Dr David Henig (University of Kent, UK) and Dr Diana Ibañez-Tirado (SOAS, UK). The paper took insights from the trajectories of mobility and geopolitical entanglements of Afghan merchants in Russia and Ukraine. In a paper on relations between Turkey and the Moldovan region of Gagauzia, Michael Erdman (SOAS, UK) contended that the Orthodox faith of the Gagauz people had created a barrier for continued cooperation given Turkish insistence of Islam being a core component of Turkishness. Finally, Dr Liene Ozoliņa-Fitzgerald (London School of Economics, UK) drew on her ethnography of an unemployment office in Riga to explore neo-liberal political subjectivity formation in post-Soviet Latvia. Her work revealed how ideals of being a 'proper European', democratic and modern person were playing a role in embedding and legitimising neo-liberal welfare policies. The papers presented at this workshop are currently being revised with a view to publishing most of them as a collection in 2016.

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