УДК 327.7

EURASIAN INTEGRATION: FROM POST-SOVIET TO NEW REGIONAL PROJECTS

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The article considers the problem of Eurasian integration as a contradictory process that has gone from disintegration of a single political and economic union to the beginning of the formation of a new regional organization of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The peculiarity of considering the problem is the combination of two research approaches: historical institutionalism and context analysis. As a result, the author concludes that the EEU member states are not very flexible in creating strong supranational bodies due to the specific character of their own political systems. On the other hand, the real economic interests of all EEU countries and Russia's geopolitical motives are centripetal factors.

Keywords: Belarus; Russia; Kazakhstan; foreign policy; Eurasian integration; institutional design; regional projects; CIS; EEU; Belt and Road initiative.

ЕВРАЗИЙСКАЯ ИНТЕГРАЦИЯ: ОТ ПОСТСОВЕТСКИХ К НОВЫМ РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫМ ПРОЕКТАМ

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Рассмотрена проблема евразийской интеграции как противоречивого процесса, который прошел путь от дезинтеграции единого политического и экономического союза к началу формирования новой региональной организации Евразийского экономического союза. Специфика изучения проблемы заключается в сочетании двух исследовательских подходов: исторического институционализма и контекстуального анализа. Автор приходит к выводу, что члены ЕАЭС не очень гибки при создании сильных наднациональных органов в силу особенностей собственных политических систем. В то же время реальные экономические интересы всех стран ЕАЭС и геополитические мотивы России являются центростремительными факторами.

Ключевые слова: Беларусь; Россия; Казахстан; внешняя политика; евразийская интеграция; институциональный замысел; региональные проекты; СНГ; ЕАЭС; инициатива «Пояс и путь».

Introduction

What is the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)? Is it a new regional integration project based on the economic principles of member countries or the reintegration of the post-Soviet space in a short form?

From the very beginning of the creation of the EEU, a question arose about the imitation of the experience of European integration. This manifested itself in different ways, but the difference between the EU and the

Образец цитирования:
Турарбекова РМ. Евразийская интеграция: от постсоветских к новым региональным проектам. *Журнал Белорусского государственного университета. Международные отношения*. 2019;2:11–18 (на англ.).

For citation:
Turarbekava RM. Eurasian integration: from post-Soviet to new regional projects. *Journal of the Belarusian State University. International Relations*. 2019;2:11–18.

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EEU remains to be the main problem. In order to answer this question, it is necessary not only to compare existing institutions, but also to look at the history or even the background of their creation.

Part of this problem is posed in my previous article, which is devoted to Eurasian integration projects in the context of the EU policy. It addressed the issues of disintegration and integration in the post-Soviet space from 1991 to 2004 [1].

Both cases (the EU and the CIS) are fundamentally different political processes: the first one is an example of integration, the second is an example of disintegration. Returning to the well-known facts, we will invent the Eurasian space from the point of view of regional building, which is expressed, among other things, in the institutionalization of the EEU project.

It is necessary to explain what methodological tools and what concepts can most fully explain the regional building of the Eurasian Economic Union. Understanding that the conflict perception of Russia in the eyes of the West continues to be the most serious problem, on the contrary, we tried to address the analysis of the context of the emergence and development of the project of Eurasian integration.

Contextual analysis, as well as historical institutionalism, are promising scientific concepts and tools for understanding the processes of regional building. Actually, only taking into account history it is possible to talk about such social phenomena as traditions, norms and values. The Eurasian megaregion includes many regions, subregions, with a different set of civilizations features, including social structures and institutions, norms, cultural traditions, both tangible and intangible. That is why Eurasia is difficult to identify as a single region with one culture, civilization, social practice.

Since the early 1990s, the European community was declared as a new "global actor" and was renamed the European Union in accordance with the Maastricht Treaty of 1993. At the same time, according to European experts, the institutionalization of the EU's foreign policy is starting [2, p. 26–27]. The emergence of such a significant global actor on the Eurasian continent, following the disappearance of another global actor which is the USSR, meant the start of a new regionalism. It is also necessary to note the strong normative-value component of European integration.

On the other hand, there was an attempt to identify regional identity within the CIS, which originated earlier in 1991–1992, with the beginning of the signing of the Agreement on the establishment of the CIS and the Alma-Ata Declaration.

Despite the different approaches to assessing what the Commonwealth of Independent States is in the text of the agreement, all the signs of regional identity are present. As evidenced by the introduction of the Treaty, which says about the "historical community... peoples..." and art. 6, 7 the normative component was not original and was close to European, which is one of the arguments in favor of the fact that the former Soviet republics tried to imitate the EU [3].

It should also be noted that the document was signed only by three actors: Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. This case requires separate consideration. It should be added that, given the absence of the Central Asian and South Caucasus republics, it was difficult to actually call that document an agreement, despite the fact that the parties referred to the Treaty of 1922, which the three countries were signatories to.

However, the dissolution of the USSR demanded the equal participation of all the Union republics. Therefore, on 21 December 1991, a summit was held in Alma-Ata, where the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the creation of the CIS was finally fixed. An interesting fact is that in one of the last parts of the document it is indicated that the participants are striving to create a "common economic space" understanding it as a space of "pan-European and Eurasian markets" [4].

Based on the foregoing, we can conclude that the post-Soviet space was not homogeneous even in the self-perception of the Soviet party elite. The space was perceived as internally divided into the European part (the republics that signed the Bialowieza Agreement) and the Eurasian (those who joined the Alma-Ata Declaration).

The collapse of the post-Soviet space: the CIS

The disintegration of the post-Soviet space developed throughout the 1990s. The key factor was the new state building in Russia. Since it was connected with the "dismantling" of the Soviet state, its goal was to decentralize the political institutions of the Soviet past. In this regard, Russia's foreign policy in the CIS was not active, but reactive. The key issue of all the CIS heads of state meetings held in 1992 was the problem of the division of the Soviet Union property.

Institutionalization of the CIS was rapid, but not very effective. Representation of interests, as well as the overall political systems of all the former republics were only being formed. Therefore, it was virtually impossible to conduct a parallel transfer of a part of sovereign rights.

Therefore, later in the first half of the 1990s, it became obvious that integration within the CIS had the format of a soft or civilized divorce. Nevertheless, Russia's military-strategic interests demanded to support the idea of Eurasian integration in order to maintain influence on the "southern flank". The CIS was not a priority in Russia's foreign policy in the early 1990s. Heading towards reforms in Russia reduced its activity in the CIS. In particular, the economy of state funds in the military sphere influenced its position in preserving a single defense space.

That was the beginning of a new era of relations between Russia and the West. In return for reducing nuclear arsenals, issue number two was the provision of loans for reforms in Russia. The allocation of small loans, the growing tensions in President B. Yeltsin's relations with the Supreme Council (Soviet Parliament), the negative consequences of the reforms and the collapse of the Soviet economy, and the disintegration of the post-Soviet space contrasted with the "romantic" relations between the Russian President and the West.

The focus of the Russian foreign policy began to change since 1993. The most important event was the adoption of the CIS Charter (22 January 1993). The adoption of the CIS Charter meant that Russia's foreign policy towards the post-Soviet republics was becoming active. The "return" of Russia to the post-Soviet space in 1993 was not complete and had a spontaneous character. There were also restrictions on Russia's activity. The contradiction between the declared desire for reintegration and practical steps clearly showed the solution of the problem of reducing the zone of the Russian ruble to the borders of Russia itself, with the exception of Tajikistan.

In the second half of 1993 Russia became an active participant in the resolution of regional conflicts in the post-Soviet space. B. Yeltsin, as President of Russia, took an active part in resolving conflicts in Azerbaijan and Georgia. The termination of armed conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia was the entry of Azerbaijan and Georgia into the CIS. This process is discussed in more detail in my previous article [1, p. 46].

The CIS project was a reintegration project in the institutional design in which the tools not typical for ordinary diplomacy were used. Undoubtedly, this was a consequence of the fact that *de facto* a single space was still partly functional, but disintegration continued.

State building, domestic political conflicts and the emergence of new regional projects

On 3–4 October 1993, the conflict between the President and the Russian Parliament reached its climax. As a result of the use of force, parliament was dissolved. The reformist liberal government of E. Gaidar excluded the republics of Central Asia from the ruble zone, since it regarded them as ballast (as it was said in the program "News" on 3–4 November, 1993). In general, it is obvious that the domestic conflict in Russia became a factor of a contradictory position. It should also be noted that in September 1993, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation A. Adamishin stated that Russia views Central Asia as a zone of vital interests ("Red Square", 18 September 1993). However, in October 1993, the policy of reform became more relevant and geostrategic interests were moved to the periphery.

The creation of a new political system in Russia was a dramatic process, which was accompanied by a conflict of values. Different political groups, conflicting with each other, advocated for different priorities in domestic and foreign policy. Representative institutions such as the Supreme Soviet and then the State Duma insisted on protecting the Russian population in the former Soviet republics and, therefore, on a more active policy in the CIS.

The results of the State Duma elections (December 1993) showed that the position of Russians in the former Soviet republics still remained the most sensitive issue. The policy of the E. Gaidar Government was not supported by the State Duma, where such parties as the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation had the majority. On the contrary, their victory showed which agenda for foreign policy was more relevant.

The disintegration of the post-Soviet space actually ended with the destruction of a single currency zone and defense space. The newly independent states actively created their political and economic systems. However, the reintegration or new integration projects of the former Soviet republics had a high social and economic order in Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus. This order was formulated through the creation of specific political systems with a very strong power of one institution – the Presidency. The constitutional framework of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan took shape between 1993 and 1995. The domestic institutional environment of these states created the conditions for long-term trends in domestic and foreign policy. Decisions in super-presidential republics became personalistic. Political capital, reputation and, accordingly, the need to fulfill promises put integration on the agenda of all three presidents of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

Without giving political assessments of such a situation, it, however, makes sense to ask the question: if these states with a super-presidential form of government create an integration association, is that part of the power that should be given to supranational bodies the presidential power?

What should be the institutional framework for a regional Eurasian organization in the event that the participating countries have such special political systems that are pyramidal, and therefore not flexible?

The almost unlimited power of the President of Russia, partly had restrictions due to the activities of parliament. In 1994–1996, the State Duma was in fact in opposition to President B. Yeltsin. For the Duma in foreign policy, the most important topics were the position of Russians in the countries of the Commonwealth and the reintegration of the USSR. If the CIS as a failed project in connection with the fragmentation of the defense and currency areas was increasingly criticized, then there was an increasing demand for other integration

projects. Such projects were the idea of the Eurasian Union of states, put forward by President of Kazakhstan in 1994 and President A. Lukashenko in 1996 on the establishment of the Union State on a part of Belarus. The distinctive feature of these regional projects is that in the first case it meant the maximum rapprochement of states and, ultimately, the creation of the Union State itself. Apart from the Belarusian President, the State Duma became the engine of integration. The Belarusian President hoped to restore ties in the sphere of industry, transport infrastructure, as well as the military-strategic sphere in a short time. The project was almost implemented, but in 2000, political changes in Russia (V. Putin became the President of Russia) influenced the pace of the Belarusian-Russian integration.

The Union State was supposed to create a parliamentary dimension, which began to function in 1996. But, already in 1999, in accordance with the Charter of the Union State, the Supreme Council and the Executive Committee received significantly more power [5].

The idea of creating the Eurasian Union of States was first expressed by the President of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev in 1994 during his lecture at Moscow State University [6]. His lecture is rightly considered the beginning of the introduction to the political discourse of the Eurasian project. But, before starting its implementation, the Kazakh President should have obtained Moscow's consent, since without Russia this project did not have a chance for implementation.

The idea of creating not the Union, but the Community was only implemented by the year 2000. In Kazakhstan, the Treaty on the Creation of the Eurasian Economic Community was signed (10 October 2000). This is an example of a more open and flexible intergovernmental organization based on an inclusive principle. The founding states of the EurAsEC are Kazakhstan, Belarus, Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Since May 2002, Ukraine and Moldova received the status of observer countries, and since January 2003 Armenia as well [7].

The Union State and the Eurasian Economic Community were the prototypes of the Eurasian Economic Union. The main difference was that the Union State and the EurAsEC were not Moscow's initiative. This is one of the key questions: why didn't Russia come up with its own regional integration initiative until 2011?

To answer this question, it is necessary to look at the political processes of the post-Soviet space in the first decade of the 2000s through "the eyes of the Kremlin".

Transition from the post-Soviet to the new regionalism: "color revolutions", new regional initiatives, the Russian project of Eurasian integration

The "color revolutions" in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), Kyrgyzstan (2005) were regarded quite unambiguously by the Russian leadership as interference in the internal affairs of these countries by the US.

The problem of the perception of "color revolutions" and the role of the United States in Eurasia in Russian political discourse must be considered in another study. But, in the opinion of Russian scholars I. Zvyagelskaya and D. Makarov, already in the late 1990s, relations between Russia and the United States "increasingly acquired the features of geopolitical rivalry" in Eurasia [8, p. 110].

For President V. Putin, it was also a challenge in the context of the US's literal military presence in Central Asia and military operations near the borders of the CIS in Afghanistan (2001–2014) and Iraq (2003–2011). All these events and processes in the aggregate provided an opportunity for the Communists, the main opposition force in Russia, to capitalize on discontent in electoral processes.

On the other hand, favorable market conditions for the prices of mineral raw materials provided vast resources for modernization of the economy, as well as for a more offensive foreign policy of the country. And here, according to the authors of report by E. Dovgan, E. Semak, R. Turarbekova, the Eurasian Economic Union begins. In particular, the report says: "If we talk about the evolution of the idea and even the first attempts to found a single economic space, we can refer to the events of 2003. In particular, on 19 September 2003 in Yalta, the presidents of Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Russia signed an Agreement on the Formation of the Common Economic Space (EEC)"[1] [9]. At that time the project, apparently, was premature. And only three years later, in August 2006, during the informal summit in Sochi, a decision was made to activate the formation of the Customs Union, but in the format of the troika: Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia [10]. According to the authors, until 2010 the pace of the Customs Union was low and the real activation of integration began in January 2010. In particular, the agreement on the single customs tariff was signed. As noted in the report, the unprecedented intensification of the process led to the formal establishment of the single economic space and in November 2011 the Declaration on Eurasian Economic Integration was signed. It was decided to establish the Eurasian Economic Commission, which institutionalized the foundation of the organization. In December 2011 the heads of state of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia adopted a decision "On the entry into force of international treaties forming the UES" from 1 January 2012. This was the beginning of the preparation of the Treaty on the EEU, which was signed on 29 May 2014 and entered into force on 1 January 2015.

[1]Hereinafter translated by *R. T.*

The institutional design of the Eurasian Economic Union from the very beginning relied on previous integration projects and organizations such as the CIS, the Union State, EurAsEC. Nevertheless, it is considered fundamentally different, since it was formally initiated by the presidents of the three countries of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. At the same time, the heads of state of these countries initiated a rather unusual discussion on the pages of the newspaper "Izvestiya".

On 3 October 2011, V. Putin published an article "A new integration project for Eurasia – the future that is born today" [11]. Its publication is a strategy and contains a number of important proposals that are now literally embodied or that are already being offered as agenda for today. In fact, this is an integration plan. And, if we compare his article for 2011 and the current state of the Eurasian Economic Union, we can conclude that it was the Russian view that became the basis for the idea of integration. The Russian President proposed to create a single economic space on the basis of the Customs Union, which is being created today, but all the institutional spheres that he identified are already involved in the process of Eurasian integration (macroeconomics, ensuring competition rules in the field of technical regulations and agricultural subsidies, transport, tariffs natural monopolies).

The next step was to prescribe a unified visa regime and migration policy. *According to the article of the Russian president, it is clear that from the outset it was not just economic integration. Moreover, the Eurasian Union was to become a pole, not a part of something.*

These two points became the most controversial in the discussions of the presidents.

On 17 October 2011, the President of Belarus also published a response in the "Izvestiya" newspaper in which *he stressed the need to view the Eurasian Economic Union as part of a Greater Europe, avoiding such definitions as a pole* [12].

Finally, on 24 October 2011, the President of Kazakhstan, N. Nazarbayev, *emphasized the economic dimension of the Union, the fact that it should be voluntary, the equality of participants, the evolutionary nature of integration* [13].

Despite the last thesis, the project was implemented at a forced pace from a formal point of view. The reason for such deliberate acceleration of events was the growing competition from the People's Republic of China and the European Union. They assign a special role to the Eastern Partnership in the framework of which an institutional dialogue was proposed, which as a result could end with the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU. An important part of this agreement was to create a free trade zone between the Partnership and Europe.

It was this point that was perceived by the Russian government as a contradiction of Eurasian integration. *Capitalization of the choice of the government of Ukraine headed by V. Yanukovych had a bad result. The political conflict was transformed into a crisis and an armed conflict.*

Establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union: stress factors, imitation and its limitations

In January 2015 the Treaty on the Establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union came into force.

Imitation is presented in a truncated version. Under the EEU Agreement of 29 May 2014, such bodies as the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council (Supreme Council), the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council (Intergovernmental Council), the Eurasian Economic Commission and the Eurasian Court, were founded [14].

Another problem of imitation is the borrowing of the EU's institutional management system in order to look like the EU. Indeed, only some fragments of the management were copied, but the principles were changed or missed. Imitation was seen even in the title. By imitating the European Union as the most successful integration project the authors of the Eurasian project counted on the positive experience of European integration. The obvious *institutional imitation of the EU by the Eurasian Economic Union has a number of basic limitations*.

Firstly, the vertical management system is conditioned by two factors: the tradition of the governance structure, since the formation of the CIS and the actual form of government of the participating countries, the presidential republics, with the exception of Armenia. Secondly, the disintegration of the USSR and the conflict between executive and representative institutions led initially to the creation of super-presidency, and when it comes to transferring a part of sovereignty to supranational institutions, this is perceived as a threat to the national sovereignty of all states, with the exception of Russia. Thirdly, the asymmetry of the socio-economic and military-political capital of the member countries naturally gives rise to fears from the small and medium-sized states of integration associations and the growth of distrust in the light of the crisis and conflict in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014). Fourthly, excessive haste in the design of the Union created many obstacles related to the incompleteness of such stages of integration as the creation of the single economic space.

The EEU future has a more negative image now because of serious criticism both inside and outside. This is the result of unresolved issues of internal barriers and forced expansion of the EEU. The situation with the protection of national interests on the institutional level is also unclear. Since the beginning of the creation of the Customs Union, there have been more than 600 barriers, exceptions and restrictions. The President of Belarus criticized this situation until

recently [15]. The problems identified by the Belarusian government in 2015–2017 meant a new stage of conflict interaction within the framework of integration. A. Lukashenko had been refusing to sign the new Customs Code for a long time, which meant even greater integration of the economies of the Union's member countries [16].

Unresolved issues with the barriers were combined with the expansion of the union, as well as an unclear picture of the representation of national interests in the institutions of the EEU. I mean formal institutions: the Eurasian Economic Commission, the Eurasian Economic Court. But the real shock for the union was the sanctions of the West against Russia, the fall of the oil prices and the devaluation of the ruble, the fall in the revenue side of the budgets, the drop in household incomes and, as a result, recession and a drop in trade. All this demonstrated the weaknesses of the economies of the EEU member countries. Basically, their raw material orientation, dependence on world economic trends and a weak ability to influence on them.

Thus, the union raised under the stressful conditions. Protectionism became not only an instrument of the policy of the EEU, but also an instrument of the member countries within the Union.

Interregional competition of projects and Eurasian integration

The most serious challenge for the EEU is its intermediate position in between the EU and China. Both powerful actors propose their regional initiative ("Eastern Partnership") and the global Belt and Road initiative (BRI), which could seriously influence the EEU future. It means that the external design of Eurasia is still under way. The fall in mutual trade within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015–2016, as well as the decline in the economies of the Union countries became a negative background for the creation of the organization. In 2017 figures for the first half of the year began to show positive dynamics [17].

The presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan in 2017 unexpectedly led to the Kazakh-Kyrgyz customs conflict [18]. But in general it is considered that the Belarusian-Russian disputes is the main economic conflict within the EEU. In the Asian part of the Union there were no such disputes. But, in fact, in the near future we can see the difficulties between the EEU and China in implementing the Belt and Road initiative. The sharp statements of Kyrgyz President A. Atambayev regarding Kazakhstan's interference in the electoral process suddenly turned into a large-scale trade war [19]. At the Council of Heads of Government of the CIS countries in Tashkent (3 November 2017), the conflict was brought to the public space by the public speeches of the Premiers of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. S. Isakov, the head of the Kyrgyz government, was trying to resolve the conflict with claims of violations by Kazakhstan of the agreements of the CIS, WTO and, in part, the EEU [20]. B. Sagintayev, head of the Kazakh government, argued relying solely on the EEU's law [21]. In their logic there are no mistakes. But, there are significant problems concerning the harmonization of the CIS, WTO and EEU agreements.

Hence, the main question arises: how will the EEU and the BRI be connected?

On 17 May 2018, the EEU and China signed the Treaty on Economic and Commercial Cooperation. This agreement is just a framework and it does not provide preferences [22]. China wants to create a free trade zone with the EEU countries, but so far this issue has not been resolved.

We assume that the EEU is integration, which will continue to develop, but in a conflict form. We have so far seen that the European Union is the main counter partner. Recent events indicate that China is also a serious counterparty, but it acts softly. Therefore, the Belt and Road is an initiative, not a program.

For the member-countries of the EEU integration is largely imaginary and regional construction of Eurasia has to be continued. Such active regional policy of Russia, the European Union and China can cause conflicts not only between small countries, but also within them.

Conclusion

Exploring Eurasian integration, and in particular the Eurasian Economic Union, at the beginning of the study, we formulate the main questions and hope to find an answer to them. The answers so far suggested are clear, unambiguous answers. Eurasian integration is the reintegration of the post-Soviet space or the geopolitical project of Russia. The second answer is the real integration of the new independent states, which are based only on economic interests.

In general, both answers are not correct. Indeed, the institutional tradition from the time of the CIS points to the idea of reintegration of the former Soviet space. In addition, V. Putin's plan outlined in his article in 2011 involves the creation of not only an economic union and a lot says in favor of the first answer.

Nevertheless, the ideas of regional integration related to the experience and example of the EU have become popular. Moreover, the European Union supports regionalization. There is so much in common on the wreckage of the Soviet Union and there is a great temptation to turn this into a profit for the elites of the newly independent states. Therefore, there were so

many projects not from Russia, which means that the idea of regional integration has capital.

By 2011 much had changed in the context of international relations, and in particular in Eurasia. Therefore, the capitalization of the idea of integration ultimately led to such a project. Each of the countries – Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus had positive motives for its creation, but did not take into account many independent and dependent variables. But it is necessary to emphasize the peculiarity of the institutional tradition – vertical ties prevail over horizontal ones. The social dimension is poorly represented. The project continues to be elite, bureaucratic.

It is a hybrid project, something between a geopolitical project and a real emerging economic association with a large number of conflicts of interest, the presence of informal institutions and opaque negotiation processes, and a difficult subject to analyze.

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Received by editorial board 22.11.2019.