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## Bases and mechanisms of regionalism in post-Soviet Central Asia

The research article analyses the bases and mechanisms of regionalism in the post-Soviet Central Asia resulting from the disintegration of the previous system. The main objectives of the paper are: identification of the most crucial determinants and constraints on the new regionalism and building of the regional identity in the above-mentioned territory, examination of the main non-economic areas of integration and cooperation between different Central Asian countries, and analysis of the mechanisms of their interdependence in the context of their independence and particular interests. The author attempts to answer the following questions: how the above regionalism may influence the post-Soviet space and geopolitical power of countries in the region? Whether and how can external players foster the development of regionalism? The case study of Central Asia is developed through the empirical analysis and interpretation of data and documents of the regional organizations and national agencies and the analytical theoretical research on regionalism.

### Podstawy i mechanizmy regionalizmu w postradzieckiej Azji Centralnej

W artykule analizowane są podstawy i mechanizmy regionalizmu w postradzieckiej Azji Centralnej, wynikającego z dezintegracji uprzednio funkcjonującego tam systemu. Głównymi celami niniejszej pracy są: identyfikacja najważniejszych determinantów i ograniczeń dla nowego regionalizmu na omawianym terenie oraz dla budowania regionalnej tożsamości, rozpoznanie głównych pozaekonomicznych obszarów integracji i współpracy krajów Azji Centralnej i analiza mechanizmów ich współzależności w kontekście ich niezależności i partykularnych interesów. Autorka próbuje odpowiedzieć na pytania, jak omawiany regionalizm wpływa na obszar postradziecki i geopolityczną siłę krajów w regionie oraz czy i w jaki sposób aktorzy zewnętrzni mogą sprzyjać rozwojowi regionalizmu. Analiza przypadku regionu Azji Centralnej obejmuje badania empiryczne i interpretację danych opartych na dokumentach organizacji regionalnych i agencji rządowych oraz na badaniach teoretycznych nad regionalizmem.

Keywords: Central Asia, regionalism, regional integration

JEL classification: F15, O19, R10

## Introduction

At the international level, regionalism means effective forms of mutual international cooperation under preferential conditions. According to Edward Halizak and Roman Kuźniar, regionalism aims at maximising development, security, sovereignty, prestige, international role, needs, and interests [Halizak, Kuźniar, 2006].

In turn, regionalization processes refer to informal relations of business, interest groups, or other public and private companies [Libman, Vinokurov, 2011]. Regionalization “develops from the bottom up through societally driven processes coming from markets, private trade, and investment flows, none of which is strictly controlled by governments. The core players are non-governmental actors – firms or individuals” [Hoshiro, 2013].

In contemporary theories of regional development it is recognized that differentiation in levels of economic development of the states in a certain region is a crucial determinant of economies’ complementarity. According to the neoclassical theory, the development of more advanced partners implies a growth of poorer countries and regions due to effective allocation and use of factors of production. In turn, the polarization theory says that as a result of development disproportions, more advanced regions attract capital and highly qualified labourers, whereas less advanced ones are not able to level these disproportions (so-called “polarization effect” or “backward wave effect”) [Dorożyński, 2011].

Apart from the economic conditions, one should remember that regional awareness and regional community’s needs and interests are also an important determinant. The essence of regionalism is the type and frequency of interactions and political will of decision-makers.

One of the dimensions of regionalism is regional integration; it is the most advanced stage of regionalism development. Integration and cooperation are based on the definition of common goals, interests, and problems shared through various forms of interdependence [Kubicek, 2009].

Regional integration can be visible in the economic sphere, common identity as a close-knit community based on common values, and common political institutions as a collective method of fulfilling practical tasks. Olga Butorina defines regional integration as “a model of collective behaviour in the context of global stratification. The creation of supra-national bodies, the expansion of regional trade, and the introduction of a common currency or citizenship – all of these are the instruments and products of regional integration” [Butorina, 2007].

As an effect of integration, involved participants move their activity to a new centre – a new organizational community. However, the above process is in favour of their national interests’ development. It is a part of state’s political strategy (top-down integration) [Jeliński, 2008; Haas, 1961]. That notwithstanding, the

bottom-up integration developed by the companies (investment activities of corporations, informal links) should not be forgotten, too.

The article examines the main determinants of regionalism in post-Soviet Central Asia, the most significant directions of regional integration (pathways of the regional order), and areas of interests and influence of external players.

We can notice different forms of interdependencies on the post-Soviet territory (including the Central Asia region), such as sectorial and institutional cooperation. Thus, there are many questions about the future shape and form of integration and cooperation in the said region. It seems that any alternative regional project could not exist successfully without some external initiative.

## 1. The most crucial determinants and constraints of a new regionalism in the post-Soviet Central Asia

Regional integration is based on many different conditions, such as geographical proximity, economic complementarity, similarity of political systems, cultural and ideological correspondence that facilitates the negotiation process, and social structure [Haas, 1961].

Joseph Nye specifies four conditions that characterize successful integration process: politicization, redistribution, reduction of alternatives, and externalization [Nye, 1980].

The processes in the post-Soviet area are dynamic. According to the integral approach (so called "transgression"), the analysis of mechanisms and phenomena observable in the post-Soviet area should take into account the specific historical, cultural, religious, geostrategic, geo-political, and geo-economic conditions.

Although some experts perceive the post-Soviet regionalism through the European integration process, it should be noted that contemporary post-Soviet Eurasian integration is hermeneutically placed in the context of the Soviet tradition [Vinkov, 2013].

The post-Soviet Central Asia can be understood as a separate region of Eurasian continent or a separate sub-region within the common post-Soviet area. The United Nations Statistics Division separates the geographical sub-region of Central Asia from the continental Asia region. The sub-region unites five former Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan [UNSD].

All of the Central Asian countries are political successors of former Soviet republics, their presidents are former communist leaders, and the leading parties are former communist parties. With the collapse of the USSR, the heads of Central Asian states have strengthened their power and reduced political opposition –

which means absence of democratic regimes and development of authoritarian or even totalitarian (e.g. in Turkmenistan under Niyazov) tendencies. Most of the authoritarian leaders preside over natural resources-rich states and have been strengthened by sustained high oil prices (neo-authoritarian political systems). An important factor of national identity building in the region is the Islamic religion. Development of the radical Islamic groups (also in neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan or Pakistan) fosters a consolidation of authoritarian power [Kono-pelko, 2009]. Though on the other hand, "so-called counterterrorism may mask clan or other ethnic and political repression" [Nichol, 2014].

In addition to the political, historic, language, ethnic, and religion similarities, one of the important determinants of regionalism in Central Asia is visible in mutual pervasion and acceptance of values (regional awareness and identity), comparable patterns and ideas on the mutual interrelations, absence of political pressure, new perception of globalization and regionalism (new paradigm), and quality change in growing needs and interests of the states [Kubicek, 2009].

However, the failure of some regional integration projects results from both external and internal conditions. Significant constraints lie in economic disproportions, multiplicity of economic systems, and high degree of economic interdependence. For example, the biggest energy-oriented economy in the region, Kazakhstan, is a major trade and labour destination for small economies of its Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan partners. The second biggest economy of Turkmenistan shows a different model of economic system (closed economy), while Uzbekistan exports a significant proportion of its products with a relatively high level of processing (cotton and gold).

Considering the global economic problems, development barriers are also characteristic of the developing countries of Central Asia: low living standards, poor infrastructure, shortage of key development resources, and a decrease in intraregional trade in exchange for an increase in interregional trade. Other domestic weaknesses concern: weak political institutions arising from the transition of post-Soviet system, little experience in state sovereignty aspect, predominance of clan structures in public life, religious and ethnic conflicts, consolidation of authoritarian power, and high level of corruption. The visible divergence of particular interests comes from the strengthening of national identity and security anxieties consequential to terrorism, religious extremism, drug-trafficking, and illegal migration. The external factor diminishing regional integration results from the geopolitical rivalry of key actors over the influence in the region, especially hegemonic and dominant economic, military, and political role of Russia in any integration projects [Sergeev, Kazantsev, Bartenev, 2013].

## 2. Main areas of regional integration. Pathways of regional order

Within regionalization processes, the economic and political spheres are inter-related. Countries, as the participants of regional integration, are political units. Regionalism is subordinate to superior goals of the state foreign policy [Halizak, Kuźniar, 2006].

Central Asian states participate in various regional and supraregional structures. Most of them are created by the Russian Federation and intraregional integration is rather weak.

Table 1. Institutional regional engagement of the post-Soviet Central Asian countries

Country Institution	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkme- nistan	Uzbekistan
CIS	x	x	x	associated member	x
EurAsEC	x	x	x		
Custom Union/EEU	x				
SES	x				
CAEC/CACO	x	x	x		x
ECO	x	x	x	x	x
CSTO	x	x	x		x
SCO	x	x	x		x

Source: Own elaboration, based on official websites of: CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States; EurAsEC – Eurasian Economic Community, EEU – Eurasian Economic Union; SES – Single Economic Space; CAEC – Central Asian Economic Community/CACO – Central Asian Cooperation Organization; ECO – Economic Cooperation Organization; CSTO – Collective Security Treaty Organization; SCO – Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

The Commonwealth of Independent States, established in 1991, consists of nine full (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) and two associated members (Turkmenistan, Ukraine) [CIS].

The CIS has proved unable to move its decision-making procedures to the supranational level. The success of the CIS integration has been weakened by national fears of losing the autonomy in decision-making and by concerns about distributional imbalances [Hansen, 2013]. Failure of the CIS project is determined by political, economic, population, and territorial dominance of Russia. However, the CIS member countries initiated other integration projects in the security (Collective Security Treaty Organization) and economic area (Eurasian Economic Community).

The Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) is an international organization that since 2000 has ensured multilateral economic cooperation among its member states – Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan joined the Community in 2006, but it suspended its participation in 2008. In 2002 Moldova and Ukraine were granted observer status at the EurAsEC, and in 2003 the same status was granted to Armenia. During their meeting in 2006, the heads of the member states made a decision to establish the Customs Union within the EurAsEC framework, between Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia as its initial members [EEC].

It is underlined that EurAsEC with its Eurasian Development Bank is one of the most effective regional organization in the post-Soviet area, not only due to its focus on institutions and formal cooperation, but also on financial and economic sectorial projects [Libman, 2011]. The greatest benefits are visible in Russian and Kazakh investments and Uzbek export markets for its gas, cotton, metal, and agriculture products.

The Customs Union between these three EurAsEC members started in 2010 and it is supposed to be only the first step on the path to closer cooperation. Other steps include establishing the Single Economic Space and Eurasian Economic Union. Single Economic Space was formally initiated in 2012 by Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Most of specific documents on macroeconomic, energetic, and transport issues, as well as movement of capital and labour are still under negotiations. Nevertheless, non-visa regime and open access to labour markets were achieved [Wiśniewska, 2013].

It could be noted that the consequential mutual benefits are asymmetric. In the political domain, the main beneficiary, Russia, strengthens its position in the post-Soviet region. In the economic area, in spite of an increase in total intraregional trade, the mutual trade exchange remains unbalanced. Only Russia noted a positive balance in trade [Świeżak, 2013]. Apart from preferential conditions for means of transport, furniture, and pharmaceuticals import, the Common Custom Tariff caused an increase in average Kazakh custom. Non-tariff barriers still limit the trade [UNECE, 2012].

In 2011, the presidents of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan signed an agreement on the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) creation in 2015. The official agreement was signed on May 29, 2014. According to Moscow plans, the EEU will be enlarged with almost all of the CIS countries. It could be a counterweight to the European Union and would be based on the Customs Union. A core of the future EEU will be Russia and the republics of Central Asia. Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are its next potential members, although they would play a marginal role in the integration process [EEC, 2013].

According to the World Bank analysis, the main beneficiary of the union will be Russia. Critics of the Eurasian integration model notice that it will deepen the political dependence of the member states on Russia and limit their actual sovereignty. Moreover, such a union does not have to provide regional stabilization for Russia's involvement in conflicts between the former Soviet republics.

In 1994, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan established the Central Asian Economic Community, in 2002 transformed into the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO). Major goals of the above organizations include deepening of international division of labour, increase of an openness of national economy, internationalization of economic activities, and acceleration of scientific and technical progress. The CACO's main objectives were to provide the necessary preconditions for effective cooperation in the political, economic, environmental, cultural, scientific, and technical spheres. Due to the visible political and economic divergences between the member countries, it has never been an active and truly dynamic organization. In 2005, after the Russian accession, it joined the EurAsEC organization [Allison, 2004; Konończuk, 2007].

The Economic Cooperation Organization was created in 1985 by Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey as an intergovernmental regional body to promote economic, technical, and cultural cooperation. In 1992 it was expanded to include two of the Central Asian republics, Azerbaijan and Afghanistan [ECO]. Its main priorities are: enhancement of intraregional trade, removal of impediments blocking transit trade and transport, increased integration of the landlocked countries with global markets, and improved regional cooperation in agriculture, energy, drug control, minerals exploitation, and intraregional tourism [Herzig, 2004].

Further integration steps, such as free trade area in region, simplification and harmonization of customs system and transit trade procedures, creation of the Railway Network, and establishment of the Parliamentary Assembly, were announced in 2013 [ECO Chronicle, 2013].

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), based on the Tashkent Treaty from 1992, was initiated in 2002 by Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan [CSTO].

The CSTO is the main military alliance in the CIS space. The Treaty has the regulatory machinery usually associated with more complex collective security systems. It was designed to address new external threats and challenges through a joint military command, by a rapid reaction force for Central Asia, a common air defence system, and a "coordinated action" in foreign security and defence policy [Hansen, 2013].

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was proclaimed in 2001 by Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan and it outlined the enhancement of trust resources in military issues, and reciprocal reduction of

military forces in border area, combating terrorism, extremism, and separatism [SCO]. This new model of cooperation, based on the “Shanghai Spirit” and respect for diversified civilizations, relies on informal, less legalistic regulations and multi-lateral discussions [Aris, 2009]. However, Russia and China are being seen using the SCO as a macroregional balancing mechanism against the US [Allison, 2004].

In 2003, the SCO established the Business Council and Consortium of the SCO Banks. China expected to create a free trade area, too. For more than ten years Beijing has been giving credits to Central Asian countries. The above policy meets Russia’s resistance, as it does not want to transform the SCO into an efficient economic organization, alternative to the EurAsEC or the Customs Union [Konończuk, 2007].

### 3. External players’ engagement in the development of a new regional architecture

The countries of Central Asia are not situated in a peripheral area of the world system anymore. They have become the “bargain powers” in the context of the international rivalry (so-called “The New Great Game”) and contribute significantly to the evolving architecture of regionalization [Rashid, 2002].

The Russian Federation uses its position with regard to the post-Soviet Central Asia countries through the instruments of trade policy – lower customs, lower prices for oil and gas, control over oil and gas pipelines, security “umbrella” (military cooperation), and institutional integration. President Vladimir Putin, on the bases of the “Russian identity” restoration, protection of the Russian-speaking population rights, and closer neighbourly policy between former Soviet Union countries, seeks to strengthen political and economic Eurasian integration controlled by Russia as its informal leader [Menkiszak, 2014].

Russian leaders try to prevent the Central Asian region from establishing relations with its rivals, such as China, USA, or Iran, and from directing the Central Asia energy resources to alternative recipients.

As from recently, crucial problems and differences between participants’ partners in Eurasian integration projects could be observed. The Kazakhstan leaders argue against the transformation of economic projects into a political integration platform with Russia as a leader. Such a shape of integration becomes contradictory to Nazarbayev policy to strengthen the Kazakhstan’s sovereignty and its independent role on the international stage [Jarosiewicz, 2013].

Similarly, objections to the Russian integration are expressed by the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko. In the economic dimension, the criticism concerns the pace of legal rules’ implementation and maintained non-tariff trade bar-

riers between the member countries. In the political sphere, the leaders of Kazakhstan and Belarus criticized Russia's strong domination in the whole process, visible for example in the case of copying the Russian legal norms to the Customs Union regulations [Wiśniewska, 2013].

China's primary goals in the region of Central Asia concentrate on economic, infrastructure, and security issues. By its involvement in the development of new transport routes (in Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan) and hydrocarbon fields, by diversifying its access to energy resources, enhancing its military presence in the region, and upholding the Central Asian regimes, China tends to weaken geopolitical rivals' influence in Central Asia [Simonov, 2005].

The scale of the United States' involvement in the region has varied over time. However, after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the position of Central Asia in the US foreign policy shifted from peripheral to centre. It focused on security issues, especially in the context of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iranian neighbourhood and radical militant Islam presence in the region. The US, in favour of regional security, supports border controls over drug trafficking and the fight with terrorism. By the means of the GUUAM organization, it helped Uzbekistan train their mobile anti-terrorists units and develop the information centre on narcotics and terrorism; nevertheless, the US assistance was limited to the Andijan massacre. In 2014 the ISAF troops will be withdrawn from Afghanistan, so the question of regional stabilization remains open [Simonov, 2005].

Iran lacks the political and economic resources needed in order for it to become a regional hegemon in post-Soviet Central Asia, and is effectively excluded by both geography and ideology from the main Western and Russian regional initiatives. Thus, it focused on bilateral cooperation with Tajikistan. To limit the US influence in the region, it seeks alternative forms of cooperation between the Muslim states, such as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).

The European Union is not a great power in the region of Central Asia, but it remains an important trading partner (mainly of Kazakhstan) and therefore plays a significant role in international cooperation initiatives. The determinants of the European Union interest in Central Asia region concern the economic, energetic, transport, and security issues, as well as its relations with Russia. The European Union and Central Asia. Strategy for a New Partnership signed in 2007 was supported through the EU financial assistance. The European Community Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the period 2007–2013 provided a total amount of EUR 750 mn of financial support for Central Asia countries [EEAS, 2012].

Under the resolutions of the New European Strategy Programme for Central Asia 2014–2020, the EU is to allocate EUR 1 bn to support the development of Central Asian countries. The funding will be provided on a bilateral basis and within

regional programs [EC, 2013]. However, it is still insufficient in comparison to the Chinese or Russian offer of EUR 10 bn of the anti-crisis fund and lower gas prices.

## Conclusions

The idea of one integrated region in the post-Soviet area brought about the disintegration of the Commonwealth of Independent States zone. The multilateral general agreements and the large number of bilateral agreements determined the CIS's failure to evolve into a highly integrated economic entity and prevented an opportunity for a political union to be formed within the CIS framework [PIEESC, 2012].

The CIS area has become more fragmented. Russia has failed to keep the whole terrain united and each country's membership is characterized by a certain unwillingness to undertake the common project. There is little reason to expect that Russia would be more successful in this respect in the future [Hansen, 2013].

Russia's idea of a "multi-speed" integration is based on a deepening of mutual integration by the core countries, strengthening of their bargaining powers with respect to non-member states, and putting pressure on other countries to join the project they initiated [Libman, Vinokurov, 2012].

In post-Soviet Central Asia, two ideas of regional integration can be distinguished. Within the first one, the political transition and regional integration are determined by political elites (top-down integration). Russian political leaders emphasize that the idea of the Eurasian Economic Union is an opportunity for the post-Soviet countries to strengthen their bargaining power. The Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia (along with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the future) will be more effective as a strong partner for the EU and other partners than the activities of individual countries [PIEESC, 2012].

On the other hand, some specialists predict the end of the idea of a united region and the start of a fragmentation processes, which means external multi-vector relations of individual pathways. Pro-integration will can be observed in the post-Soviet area, but mainly within particular sub-regions; it thus assumes different forms than the reintegration initiated by Russia (bottom-up integration).

According to Evgeny Vinokurov, regional integration should be understood as a tool, not as a purpose ("pragmatic Eurasianism"). It is a base of successful bottom-up integration – free flow of goods, services, labour, and capital (to guarantee long-term stability and success of the integration project) [Vinokurov, 2013].

Non-democratic regimes of the post-soviet area, including the Central Asia republics, in many ways perceive the process of regional integration (especially at the regional security level) as a threat to their independence and use it as an in-

strument of institutional protection of their national independence and sovereignty. This kind of top-down integration in Central Asia is being called “protective integration” [Nikitina, 2011].

Unlike regional security organizations, the CSTO and the SCO, some of the regional economic organizations, such as the EurAsEC and the ECO, seem to demonstrate a political will of further deeper integration. However, it should be noted that mutual intraregional relations in Central Asia are weak due to the asymmetric connections with Russia as a dominant player in the former Soviet Union space. They are not able to deepen their multilateral relations at the sub-region level without any external initiative. The countries of Central Asia belong to the group of landlocked countries with less openness and access to international markets [Libman, 2012].

The post-Soviet Central Asian republics, in spite of their interdependence with Russia and decrease in the intraregional economic activity, do cooperate with other external partners (China, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, EU, ECO, or SCO). Multi-vector activities of the Central Asian states, mainly Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, come from their geographical location, profiles of their economies based on natural resources, and security stabilization needs. On the other hand, “The New Great Game” in the region brought about new integration strategies of “balance” between China and Russia.

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