

Reassembling Post-Soviet Eurasia: Russia's Leadership Potential in Conditions of External Pressure

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Abstract. The article examines the change in the world order and its geopolitical, geoeconomic, cultural and humanitarian consequences for Eurasian integration. The stages of transformation of the post-Soviet space after the collapse of the USSR are identified. The main risks for the countries of the region are characterized. It is concluded that medium-term challenges for integration processes include three areas: energy transition, information and communication revolution, including the expansion of digital platforms and the development of large language models, as well as the policy of the United States and other Western countries to contain and slow down the technological progress of Russia, China and other non-Western countries. These challenges pose a threat of consolidating post-Soviet Eurasia on the periphery of world development, but at the same time form the prerequisites for accelerating integration. Recommendations are given on the need to strengthen the scientific and technological direction of integration interaction with the leading role of Russia up to its approval as the main one within the EAEU. This process should be built on the basis of mutual benefit and strengthening trust, strengthening humanitarian cooperation between Russia and its partners in Eurasian integration.

Keywords: Post-Soviet space, Eurasia, Russia foreign policy, Eurasian integration, Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), CIS, science and technical cooperation

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Introduction

The implementation of integration projects in the post-Soviet space is one of the priorities of Russia's foreign policy¹. Effective achievement of the set tasks is determined by the compliance of Russian practical steps with the situation in the region and the international situation as a whole.

The purpose of the article is to analyze the key trends influencing the political course of the states of the region, as well as global challenges affecting the regional situation. Achieving the goal includes an analysis of the processes, as a result of which it is expected to determine the main risks and priorities for the further implementation of Russia's leadership potential in the region.

The concept of "leadership potential" means Russia's ability to progressively implement its integration project, which is defined as a comprehensive international project covering several states, designed to promote increased economic connectivity and coordination of their actions in the sphere of economy, security and foreign policy with Russia playing a leading role. Integration is implemented on the basis of trade and economic ties, interests in the sphere of security and civilizational community, primarily the Russian language and common historical memory. The Eurasian Economic Union is considered the key "supporting" element of Russia's integration project as the most advanced multilateral association in the region, within which a high level of integration has been achieved, including the creation of a customs union, common technical standards and permanent supranational bodies.²

Materials and Methods

The study material consists of official documents and statements by officials, allowing us to draw conclusions about the priorities for the development of the Russian integration project in Eurasia, the vector of actions of a number of major extra-regional actors. In preparing the article, we used materials from the media and official Internet resources, as well as expert publications necessary for reconstructing events, highlighting the stages of regional development, the main modern processes, and identifying the challenges underlying regional interaction. We also used data from official trade, economic and social statistics, allowing us to assess the intensity of integration interaction within the Eurasian Economic Union.

The chronological framework of the study covers the period from the dissolution

¹ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (approved by the President of the Russian Federation V.V.Putin on March 31, 2023). Available from: <https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1860586/>.

² Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union of May 29, 2014. Available from: https://www.economy.gov.ru/material/file/2bbbf9ae33443d533d855bf2225707e/Dogovor_ees.pdf.



of the USSR to the present, with an emphasis on the latest trends after 2020. Historical and institutional approaches, as well as methods of analysis and synthesis, comparative analysis were used.

Results

The post-Soviet space remains “post-Soviet” as it is “linked” together by an infrastructural transport framework, the Russian language and culture are still widely used here, helping to preserve a common communicative space across state borders. At the same time, the post-Soviet space continues to fragment, centrifugal tendencies are accelerating in a number of countries, there are political and armed conflicts within the region, including between CIS members. These tendencies are superimposed on the global processes of economic integration and regionalization that have been actively unfolding in recent decades [1]. At the same time, the sustainability of these processes in the long term is not obvious, modern crises raise the question of slowing down globalization or deglobalization. Within the post-Soviet space, competition between extra-regional players is growing, which intensified long before the pandemic and the CIS [4]. Leading global actors are promoting their civilizational projects. The US is a military-ideological project of the struggle of democracies against autocracies, camouflaging a dual task - inflicting a strategic defeat on Russia in Ukraine and slowing down and preserving the economic and technological progress of the PRC. China is promoting its version of globalization, formalizing it not only in terms of infrastructure and economics (the Belt and Road), but also culturally and humanitarially within the framework of the Global Development Initiative through the UN and the Global Civilization Initiative through inter-party dialogue³. Trade and technological interaction is used as the main tool for expansion, including package solutions such as “smart and safe city” imported by Central Asian countries.

The post-Soviet space occupies a significant place in these projects. China is strengthening its interaction with Belarus and the Central Asian countries. The collective West, led by the United States, is waging a proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, increasing pressure on the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. A striking example is Armenia, in which France and Great Britain are showing increased interest, but not in the economic sphere, but in the sphere of information and political influence. Turkey is showing ambitions on the southern perimeter of the post-Soviet space, especially in connection with the results of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the military alliance with Azerbaijan, and the build-up of its military-technical and cultural-humanitarian presence in the countries of Central Asia.

The European Union, which remains one of the leading trade and economic partners of the post-Soviet countries, is making active attempts to convert its economic role into geopolitical influence on the countries of the region, including through numerous programs in the sphere of humanitarian influence and assistance to international development [2,

³ Global Civilization Initiative continues contributing Chinese wisdom to all humanity. 2024. 15 March. Available from: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202403/1308882.shtml>.

7]. Russia's launch of the SVO in response to NATO expansion, the threat to the security of Donbass, and the US's refusal to enter into meaningful agreements in the area of security guarantees has led to an increase in the struggle of external players for the post-Soviet space [6].

The significance of these processes for Russia's foreign policy and national security includes three important changes.

1. Geopolitical. Today, the confrontation in this area is most clearly manifested in Ukraine, but the status quo is changing in other regions, for example, in Transcaucasia and Africa. In the long term, two scenarios are possible. It is possible that the existing world order will be adjusted with a stronger role for Russia, China and a number of countries of the World Majority due to the democratization of international institutions without a direct “hot” war between the great powers. This will stabilize the situation for several more decades, while preserving the institutions of the Yalta-Potsdam order, including the UN. An alternative scenario is a full-scale collapse of the world order through a series of major wars, including possible clashes between the great powers. This will lead to the victors forming a fundamentally new configuration of institutions.

2. Geoeconomic. The changing balance of power in terms of accumulation of global wealth and material and technical development with the center of gravity shifting from West to East. In 1990, the share of the G7 countries in world GDP at purchasing power parity was more than 50%, and as of the beginning of 2024 - about 30.3%, while the BRICS countries (before expansion) accounted for 35.6%.⁴ These processes are also changing the political balance of power. The US still has an “excess privilege” in the form of the dollar as the world's reserve currency and global military potential, which could lead to attempts to overturn the board of the “world game” by force. A prototype of this can be found in the early 2000s in the implementation of the neoconservative project “For a New American Century,” which included US military interventions in Asia and the Middle East.

3. Cultural and humanitarian. The era of “soft power” as a euphemism for the cultural and economic hegemony of the West is coming to an end. The key change is that the culture, values and way of life of the West are no longer considered to be the only alternatives. Firstly, in the West there is a mutation of the cultural code and way of life, when the erosion of the middle class and the tension caused by it are obscured by gender, racial and climate doctrines of an irrational nature in the spirit of transhumanism. Secondly, in the non-Western world, primarily Russia and China, alternatives are being formulated – traditional values and civilizational diversity.⁵

The transformations and challenges noted set the coordinate system for analyzing the situation in the post-Soviet space. For a complete picture, it is necessary to reconstruct

⁴ Russia says rising economic bloc BRICS surpasses G7 in purchasing power parity. Available from: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/russia-says-rising-economic-bloc-brics-surpasses-g7-in-purchasing-power-parity/3155753>.

⁵ On approval of the Fundamentals of State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values: Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated 09.11.2022 No. 809. Available from: <https://www.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202211090019>.

the region's recent history. The following stages of geoeconomic development of the post-Soviet space can be identified (see Table).

Table. Stages of transformation of the post-Soviet space

Period	Brief description
1988–1998	Structural restructuring of the economies of the countries of the region – from laws on cooperatives and market reforms to the default of 1998, weakening and breaking of cooperative chains in the region
1998–2008	Active integration of the region into the world market, increasing exports, relative stabilization of the economic situation, but in the logic of asymmetric relations with developed Western countries (export of products with low added value). Increased confrontation in relations with US interference in the affairs of states in the post-Soviet space and NATO expansion (Bucharest summit) led to Georgia's invasion of South Ossetia and the Russian military operation to force Georgia to peace.
2009–2013	Regional integration received an impetus (the CIS FTA, the Customs Union, the entry into the draft Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union) against the backdrop of the global financial and economic crisis of 2008–2009, which revealed the vulnerability of the region's economies in integrating into the global economy. A certain role was also played by the attempt to «reset» relations between the US and Russia, which contributed to a temporary reduction in Western opposition to the ties of post-Soviet countries with Russia.
2014–2019	The Ukrainian crisis and Western sanctions contributed to the sovereignty of the Russian economy through import substitution, development of agriculture, etc. After the creation of the EAEU, against the backdrop of the crisis in relations between Russia and the United States, the processes of Eurasian integration slowed down, but proved their worth as beneficial for the participating states.
2020 – present time	The pandemic has accelerated the growth of interstate rivalry, the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis and the beginning of the NWO have led to a radical reorientation of the Russian economy to the global South and East, a reconfiguration of logistics, which has given significant economic gains to Russia's partners in the EAEU, but has caused increased pressure on them from Western countries

Source: compiled by the author

Based on the analyzed regional historical and contemporary global processes, it is possible to identify a number of key challenges that will determine the intra-regional dynamics of relations in the post-Soviet space in the medium term of the next 5-7 years.

a) growing threats to political stability – from information manipulation to “color” revolutions and various forms of extremism. Mass unrest in Belarus in 2020 and Kazakhstan in 2022 clearly highlighted the increased political risks;

b) the growing influence of extra-regional players and the risks of their rivalry in the region against the backdrop of geopolitical tensions, the risks of resource shortages in individual sub-regions, including basic resources (fresh water, arable land) that determine

food security;

c) the growing risks of ending up on the periphery of the scientific and technological transformation, which will determine the new distribution of resources and influence in the world, due to the tightening of the US and Western countries' course towards protectionism and the slowdown in the technological development of non-Western countries.

Based on the analysis of key global processes and their impact on the region, historical stages of development of the post-Soviet space and medium-term challenges for the countries of the region, it is advisable to formulate a number of recommendations from the standpoint of Russian interests.

First of all, the most important field of activity is the sphere of humanitarian cooperation between Russia and its closest neighbors and partners in the CSTO and the EAEU. The Russian side began to formulate priorities several years ago [5]. Taking into account the difficulties of achieving a common position on humanitarian issues even within the EAEU, it is important to set the goal of creating a common, scientifically based understanding of the modern world system from the point of view of strategic challenges. This raises the question of the need to strengthen the interaction of scientific institutions and expert circles - at least within the EAEU and, possibly, the CSTO. It is necessary to form a common understanding of the main directions of development of the modern world, the risks and opportunities that they create for the countries of the region. The most important areas for coordinating common efforts in understanding international processes are the following.

First, the so-called energy transition to renewable energy sources and potential coercive measures from the West (carbon tax, etc.) pose a serious challenge to all EAEU countries. As does the West's securitization of technological chains and its struggle to slow down the development of the global South.

Technological progress influences the balance of power, creates divisions and rivalries in the world. This is primarily about the redistribution of markets. The transition of the global energy sector to “green” rules, for the writing of which the EU and the USA are currently competing, will give the West the opportunity to dictate conditions to non-Western countries. However, there are still many unknowns in the energy transition equation, including the resource security of this process, side effects in the area of the growing gap between rich and poor countries, where “dirty” projects for the extraction of rare earth materials will be located, etc. Today, there is already a tough struggle for the redistribution of markets in the area of “green” energy equipment. Along with this, there are also international legal issues, especially in the area of “soft” law. For example, the formula for calculating the carbon “footprint”, the redistribution of natural rent and the export of emissions to developing countries. The countries of post-Soviet Eurasia, which have a developed fuel and energy complex, are vulnerable to these challenges.

Secondly, the poorly controlled global expansion of digital platforms creates the risk of a new form of feudalism, given the degree of their control over ordinary participants

of such platforms – individuals, small and medium businesses, and government bodies. The development of artificial intelligence, like the expansion of platforms, raises the question not so much about IT standards and infrastructure, but about a worldview, when the echo chamber effect, isolating the user due to the content recommendation system in the news feed of his social networks, is replaced by large language models that formulate answers to the user's search queries. Obviously, these answers can be formed from different value and ideological positions, and the lack of subjectivity in this area leads not so much to technological as to mental colonialism.

Thirdly, the US ban on exports of advanced semiconductors and other modern technologies to China, Russia and other countries reflects new post-global trends. The rules of globalization no longer suit the West, so it has opted for actively restraining the progress of developing countries. Therefore, the countries of post-Soviet Eurasia have little choice: either to form collective technological sovereignty based on Russia's leadership, or to slide into the category of "third world" countries in social and technological terms. The issue of technological progress today is not only a question of the possibilities of forming and revealing human potential, but also a question of the availability of enormous resources: from fresh water, arable land, energy and metals to rare earth minerals. At the same time, post-Soviet Eurasia has the strategic resources necessary to ensure a worthy place for itself in the updated system of the future world order. The EAEU has proven itself as a useful tool – this is evidenced not only by its effective use under sanctions in 2022–2024, which resulted in the growth of mutual trade and cash flows. This is also evidenced by the results since the establishment of this association in 2015: the growth of mutual trade in value terms (the share of mutual trade in foreign trade has remained virtually unchanged), the growth of labor migration, the growth of cargo turnover, etc.⁶

The EAEU member states have significant mineral reserves. The global significance of Northern Eurasia is manifested in energy, logistics (transcontinental corridors, including North-South, West-East and the Northern Sea Route), agriculture, the presence of arable soil, forests, fresh water, etc. However, in order to successfully use these resources for the stable development and integration of post-Soviet countries, mainly within the EAEU, integration needs meaningful content and strategic goal-setting. Such a strategic goal could be to ensure security for stable development and scientific and technological progress while preserving the human in man (traditional values). Thus, in the context of growing global demand for electricity, its deficit is expected, including due to the huge consumption of electricity during digitalization. The construction of a nuclear power plant will allow Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to prepare for this moment. Cooperation with Russia will help create entire industries in these countries that will increase the level of competence, as is happening today in Belarus through the education and involvement of local specialists and contractors in the processes of construction and provision of nuclear power plants.

⁶ Information report "Eurasian economic integration". Government of the Russian Federation. Available from: <http://government.ru/news/49224/>.

Discussion

The analysis shows that an important issue is the symmetry of benefits and costs in the process of creating an association and creating its material platform. In recent years, there have been many obstacles along this path - from weak cooperation chains in industrial production [3] to growing differences in the humanitarian sphere against the backdrop of a reduction in the use of the Russian language in a number of neighboring states and distancing from a common history and culture. These problems are known to specialists and cannot be quickly and completely eliminated. Nevertheless, this does not negate the need for work that Russia would conduct as a pole of attraction for the entire region, taking into account the interests of its partners, but at the same time Russia would encourage them to play by common, transparent rules, reciprocating concessions and "bonuses" from the Russian side. Russian support is possible in the context of mutually beneficial cooperation, export of Russian industrial products and standards to countries and regions, providing it with valuable resources mined in neighboring countries, which will help strengthen Russia's economic security and its position in foreign markets.

Conclusions

Eurasian integration with Russia as the leader is a project that is economically beneficial for all participants, although the benefits are not always distributed equally. But the project has proven its viability and usefulness even in the face of unprecedented sanctions pressure.

In the coming years, the Eurasian Economic Union and other regional associations that are a priority for Russian foreign policy will face serious challenges. They will affect the participating countries, but there is no reason to expect that the countries will seek an answer to the challenges in strengthening integration with Russia. Contradictory trends of recent decades show that, although all participants in the EAEU and CSTO are seriously dependent on the Russian economy and security guarantees, this does not prevent them from striving to develop relations with third countries.

Therefore, the continued progressive development of Russia's Eurasian integration project, which is a success of Russian diplomacy, depends on targeted project and programmatic actions. They consist of designing future development scenarios and priorities. In this process, the critical variable on which success depends is not only economic connectivity, but first and foremost the ability of countries to develop common ideas about the future, combining pragmatic interests and values, strengthening the civilizational community over national, ethnic and religious diversity. Educational cooperation and scientific diplomacy will help solve this problem. The formation of a regional techno-scientific union and the development of the EAEU in this direction may prove expedient provided that the parties agree on and launch real, economically mutually beneficial

technologically complex projects, as well as strengthening trust based on humanitarian cooperation and developing common assessments of strategic risks and opportunities.

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