

# Chapter 5

## The Main Stages of Eurasian Integration Development

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The scholarly approach toward the analysis of the issue of stages of Eurasian integration has to offer not only a timeline data with milestones and the key events, but also conceptualized logic of Eurasian integration alongside with explanation of the consequent steps that were undertaken by the regional countries on their way to create the current level of integration. The chapter starts with the point that Russia, as the biggest political, economic, and military power in the region played a fundamental role in the integration of the post-Soviet republics. Practical steps in this way were made only when Russian leadership embraced this idea as the best alternative to the other forms of interaction and cooperation for the post-Soviet space under the umbrella of the CIS.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of newly independent states created a very unique political atmosphere in the region. This atmosphere was widely associated with the term “civilized divorce”. However historical reality proved that the newly established Russian elite headed by the ‘young democratic reformers’ led by Boris Yeltsin have seen the post-Soviet republics as new political entities on the geographical map which would inevitably remain in the Russian sphere of influence. Just because the Russian Federation will remain the most powerful country that holds the majority of resources. This thesis was clearly outlined in several documents issued by Yeltsin’s administration. Specifically so-called ‘Burbulis memorandum’. The concentration of the greatest portion of natural resources, strategic military might, and core Soviet industrial potential within Russian borders created an illusion in the minds of Russian political elite that this made it the center of gravity for the former Soviet republics without the economic obligations and responsibilities inherited from the USSR. Drastic consequences of economic reforms in Russia, the war in Chechnya, social and political instability made it impossible to apply the

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smooth scenario of restructuring the USSR into the CIS as a new more adaptive and comfortable form of regional cooperation with the central role played by the Russian Federation.

Dramatic economic crises, as well as political turbulence in Russia and many other regional states, have ruined those hopes of Yeltsin's administration and CIS did not become a new efficient form of regional cooperation. On the contrary, it very soon evolved into a very bureaucratic and rigid mechanism with very limited efficiency. At the same time, the exploitation of ideological constructions of common history, joint cultural and linguistic space, cross-border social and family ties among former Soviet republics soon proved to be useless as a platform for starting the real reintegration process during the early 90s.

Then in the late 90s, and the early 2000s regional integration process led by Russia evolved into a mixture of tools and mechanisms used by the Russian Federation to reinforce its role as a locomotive of regional integration. This mixture consisted of the variety of economic, energy-associated and military tools used as a policy of 'carrot and stick' supporting the countries that were willing to remain as Moscow's close partners and punishing those who were not so pliant and manageable in terms of their policy toward Russia. Among those instruments, we could see playing with prices of Russia's natural resources (primarily oil and gas), privileged access/denial to the Russian internal market, using Russian peacekeeping forces for ensuring Kremlin's influence in the series of regional conflicts, etc.

Such an ambiguous Russian policy was sending a very controversial political and economic signals to post-Soviet republics. This negatively affected the overall strategic situation in the region and provoke strong disintegrative accords (creation of alternative projects such as GUUAM (later GUAM), OEC) and velvet revolutions in some countries of the region, etc. This is how the region faced the new phenomenon of 'multi-speed and multi-level' integration. It became obvious that some of the former Soviet republics do not share the logic and substance of integration process the way it was seen by Moscow. In sum, these measures of economic and political pressure on some neighbors combined with fostering and rewarding the others did not bring a strong integrative accord to the region.

To avoid this negative trend it was decided that selective measures of pressure and support have to be replaced by the more consistent strategy. That strategy should include systematic measures and pragmatic economic approach to replace obsolete ideas of common history, cultural and social unity as the justification of integration's necessity. With the revisited idea of Eurasian integration, goals of the integration process were changed as well: to create a stronger regional economic center that would help to face negative global economic threats. The new integration entities and structures started to take pragmatic and practical forms. So the new stage of Eurasian integration takes place in the mid-2000s alongside with fundamental rethinking of its integration strategy by Moscow.

This stage gave the start of the new logic of interstate cooperation based on the principles that economic cooperation will be the backbone of any future forms of long-term cooperation. 2011-2015 opened the new era of post-Soviet integration even though at that moment it was the initiative supported by only three republics of the former USSR. Since that time, we are facing the evolution of integration strategies and practices executed and applied by Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia (later Armenia and Kyrgyzstan).

However, the change of the paradigm does not necessarily mean that all the issues were solved and we should expect steady progress. The new paradigm and the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015 provoked a number of new issues and obstacles, which are still needed to be addressed in the years to come. The main idea of the chapter is to present the dynamics and key stages of Eurasian integration in its historical retrospective, with a certain emphasis on the role of political elites in shaping this process and correcting its substance, speed and, nature. Our argument consists of the hypothesis that the success and failures of Eurasian integration depended on the post-Soviet political elites eager to

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