

Russia's attitude toward integration associations in the post-Soviet space

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Abstract. This article examines the characteristics of interactions between Russia and integration associations in the Post-soviet space since 1991. The author concludes that this direction was one of the most important in Moscow's foreign policy during the presidency of the four Russian leaders. A key task for Russian leadership has always been the enhancement of integration within the framework of the Customs Union, Eurasian Economic Community, EURASEC Customs Union, and Single Economic Space, as well as within the Collective Security Treaty and Collective Security Treaty Organization.

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Introduction

There exists in contemporary international relations a marked trend towards integration between states. The most successful regional integration experiment in modern times belongs to the nations, which established the European Economic Community (EEC), later converted into the European Union (EU). This model of integration became somewhat "contagious", and a number of other countries established their own regional associations, vaguely reminiscent of the EEC / EU. Several associations of this sort appeared in the Post-soviet space.

This article aims to explore the evolution of Russia's official position towards integration associations on the Post-soviet space from 1991 through the present. By the term of "Post-soviet space", we mean the states that emerged after the collapse of the USSR, but did not join other geopolitical groupings (namely the European or Euro-Atlantic spaces). They include both the full members of the international community (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan) and quasi-states (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). As for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which were also constituent republics of the Soviet Union, they cannot be considered part of the Post-soviet space, as in 2004, they joined the EU and NATO.

Modeling integration in the post-Soviet space

At present, there are three prevailing models for the integration of post-soviet states:

International associations which aim to promote closer cooperation of the member states within their area of focus: the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security

Treaty (CST) / Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Customs Union / Eurasian Economic Community (EURASEC) / the EURASEC Customs Union and Single Economic Space, GU (U) AM, the Central Asian Union (CAU) / Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC) / the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO);

Institutionalized and non-institutionalized bilateral alliances which aim to develop high-level cooperation between participating countries, but do not seek a full or partial merger (the Union State of Russia and Belarus, the non-institutionalized unions of Russia and Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan);

Non-institutionalized alliances that endorse a broad cooperation of the participating states and provide them with mechanisms for full or partial unification (the military alliances of Russia and Abkhazia and South Ossetia).

This article will examine only the issues of interaction between the Russian Federation and the international associations in the Post-soviet space. The activities of bilateral alliances involving Russia warrants further study.

The Yeltsin years: proposed reunification

Since the collapse of the USSR, the development of ties with the former Soviet republics has remained the Russia's top foreign policy priority [1].

Until the end of 1994, Russian leadership viewed its bilateral contacts with neighboring countries through the lens of multilateral cooperation within the framework of the Commonwealth of the Independent States. Hence, the Commonwealth was a top priority of Russian diplomacy, and Moscow sought to push the member states to enhance cooperation within this association [2]. In fact, its

attitude towards the other members of CIS had arguably not changed significantly since the Soviet era: it still saw them as junior partners.

However, the experiences of 1993 and 1994 demonstrated that the former Soviet republics had no wish to participate in a system in which they would not be equals. For example, the Central Asian states launched sub-regional integration projects without Russia's participation. In 1994, they established the Central Asian Union [3]. Such steps did not thrill Moscow.

The Russian leadership also realized that the CIS was not capable enough to advance integration initiatives. Thus, Russia turned to sub-regional organizations a means to implement its foreign policy. In May of 1992, Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan signed the Collective Security Treaty, which designated them political and military allies [4]. In 1993, they were joined by Azerbaijan, Georgia and Belarus. In 1995, Russia and Belarus established a Customs Union, which Kazakhstan joined soon after, and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, in 1996 and 1999, respectively. Meanwhile, Russia's interest in the CIS cooled a great deal, and as a result, it has faced an ongoing and existential crisis since 1996.

In August of 1998, the Russian government defaulted, which had a negative impact across all integration associations under the aegis of Moscow. Both the CST and the Customs Union were plunged into crippling stagnation, and in 1999, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan withdrew from the CST, which as a result could no longer be called the "Tashkent treaty" [5].

In 1997, a number of post-soviet states embarked on an integration project unrelated – or in opposition – to Russia: Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova established the GUAM community that initially had a distinct Anti-Kremlin flavor. The aim of the organization was the implementation of the TRACECA project (Transport Corridor Europe – Caucasus – Asia), geared towards bringing Central Asian and Caspian hydrocarbons to European markets while bypassing Russia. In 1999, the GUAM was enlarged with the addition of Uzbekistan and changed its name to GUUAM (the pronunciation of this longer name baffled many). As for the Russian Federation, while its leadership never openly criticized this grouping, the Russian media took a more aggressive approach [6].

Vladimir Putin 1.0: acceleration of sub-regional integration under Moscow

In 2000, when Vladimir Putin came to power, Russian diplomacy in the Post-soviet space became more consistent and pragmatic. In particular,

these changes were manifested in Moscow's attitude towards integration process [7]. Thus, the key foci of CIS activities became the enhancement of economic, and following 2006 – humanitarian relations between the member states, while the development of broad-based integration or political relations disappeared from the radar.

Russia significantly expanded cooperation with its partners within the Customs Union, and in 2000, the grouping was converted into a full-fledged international organization, the Eurasian Economic Community. In 2003, the Community aroused the interest of Kyiv, which promised to allow Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and the Ukraine to form a Single economic space. However, in 2004, Ukraine's rapprochement with its partners was disrupted by the "Orange Revolution", which resulted in a Westward shift in Ukraine's diplomatic orientation. In 2005, Ukraine withdrew from the Single economic space; at the same time, EURASEC was joined by Uzbekistan [8].

In 2002, Moscow transformed the CST into a full military-political bloc called the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization). In 2006, Uzbekistan returned to this organization, and the number of its participants reached seven.

After 2000, Russia began expanding its cooperation with the Central Asian Economic Community, which was transformed in 2002 into the politically-oriented Central Asian Cooperation Organization. In 2004, Russia became a full member of the association; thus, the CACO lost its geographical specificity (as a truly Central Asian bloc) and, the next year, merged with EURASEC [9].

In 2001, Vladimir Putin announced that he recognized the right to exist for all sub-regional associations in the Post-soviet space, including GUUAM [10]. He went on to officially mention GUUAM another two times during his first term in office. In 2002, GUUAM entered a serious crisis. First, Uzbekistan suspended its participation in the association due to its ineffectiveness. After the "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine, GUUAM became openly hostile to Russia. This turn worried Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan, the former of which withdrew from the association in 2005 (after which the organization reverted to its original name, GUAM), and the latter reduced its participation in its activities to a minimum. Since 2007, GUAM has remained in a state of stagnation.

Russia under Medvedev: consolidation of prior trends

In general, Dmitry Medvedev's foreign policy toward the Post-soviet space resembled that of his predecessor. The CIS became "dialogue platform"

for him: the level of interaction of its member states was kept to a minimum, however, nobody sought its dissolution.

The “Five-day War” in the South Caucasus, which broke in August of 2008, and the harsh reaction of the West to Russian operations against Georgia pushed Moscow to strengthen the CSTO and establish a Collective Rapid Reaction Force, modeled on the image of its NATO counterpart [11].

In 2010, Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan began building the EURASEC Customs union, which was to become the first real integration association on the Post-soviet area. In 2012, it reached a level of a Unified economic space. However, EURASEC split into two parts: the “core states,” which were building the Customs Union, and the “periphery countries,” which were more isolated from the integration process (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan). Tashkent, which had not yet ratified most of agreements concluded within EURASEC, decided to withdraw from the community as a whole.

Finally, the GUAM project continued to languish. After the political upheavals in Moldova occurred in 2009, and Victor Yanukovich won the Ukrainian presidential elections of 2010, three out of four members of the association lost interest in its activities. While Russian leadership did not comment on these changes, it was obviously satisfied with them.

Vladimir Putin 2.0 and contemporary diplomacy: towards greater effectiveness

After Vladimir Putin’s return to power in 2012, Russia’s attitude towards integration associations on the Post-soviet space became somewhat more rigid: Moscow no longer supported institutions which had shown no visible progress for the previous years.

In 2012, the Russian leadership proposed the dissolution of EURASEC. The next year, this proposal received support from Kazakhstan. The states building the Customs Union and the Single Economic Space decided to establish the Eurasian Economic Union – an effective, streamlined, and integrated organization that will be launched in 2015 [12].

Simultaneously, Russia insisted on strengthening the internal unity of the CSTO. However, this approach caused a negative reaction from Uzbekistan, which withdrew from the organization in June of 2012. However, the decision of Tashkent did little to damage CSTO – on the contrary, it made it more cohesive.

As for the CIS, it remains a “dialogue platform” and a “discussion forum” for the former

Soviet republics – it has no real influence, and is not likely to gain any in the near future.

Conclusion

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the enhancement of integrative processes in the Post-soviet space remained one of the most important goals of Russian foreign policy. In some organizations, Moscow was the main founder and key player (CIS, the Customs Union / EURASEC / EURASEC Customs Union, the CST / CSTO). In the case of others, it joined somewhat later (CACO), and with others, it had no official contact (GU (U) AM). The institutions where Russia’s position was active experienced steady growth, while the associations opposing it faced serious problems.

Findings

From 1991 through the present, Russia’s attitude towards the integration associations in the Post-soviet space has been quite inconsistent. From 1991 through 1994, Moscow focused on the enhancement cooperation within the CIS and did not recognize the right of its partners to participate in alternative groupings. From 1995 through 1999, Russia encouraged the “multi-speed integration” and established sub-regional associations in which it played a pivotal role. Since 2000, this has been a prevailing trend in Moscow’s diplomacy. As time has passed, Russia has aimed to increase the effectiveness of integration associations and refused support to institutions viewed as ineffective. CIS, the Customs Union / EURASEC / EURASEC Customs Union, and the CST / CSTO have traditionally been most important for Russia, while the GU (U) AM opposed its interests.

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