

Борьба за Евразию

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Аннотация: в последние годы внимание России и внерегиональных государств к странам постсоветского пространства усилилось. Конкуренция между Россией и США, которая началась после распада СССР за постсоветское пространство, вышла на новый уровень. Для России постсоветское пространство является сферой жизненных интересов. Экономические и политические отношения с соседями, внутривнутриполитическая ситуация в бывших советских республиках оказывают непосредственное влияние на развитие России. Этими факторами объясняется повышенный интерес к евразийской интеграции и интеграционному проекту — Евразийскому экономическому союзу (ЕАЭС). Подобные устремления России и поддержка интеграционного проекта со стороны части стран постсоветского пространства негативно воспринимаются США. Американская сторона не заинтересована в появлении новых региональных центров влияния на постсоветском пространстве, рассматривая это в качестве угрозы своим интересам. В этом контексте, американская политика сосредоточена на противодействии развитию евразийской интеграции и укреплению влияния ЕАЭС. Несмотря на препятствия со стороны Запада, страны, входящие в ЕАЭС, последовательно предпринимают шаги, направленные на развитие интеграции. Достижение долгосрочных целей, которые они определили в различных документах, должно вывести их на новый уровень экономического сотрудничества. Наряду с успехами, которые удалось достигнуть с момента создания ЕАЭС, евразийская интеграция сталкивается с рядом трудностей. Помимо внутренних проблем, большое влияние оказывают проблемы в мировой экономике. Они усилились после начала пандемии коронавируса, который негативно сказался на развитии стран, входящих в ЕАЭС.

Негативное влияние на интеграцию оказывают внутривнутриполитические проблемы, с которыми сталкиваются страны ЕАЭС. Внутривнутриполитический кризис в Белоруссии, начавшийся во второй половине 2020 года, конфликт между Арменией и Азербайджаном в Нагорном Карабахе, обострение внутривнутриполитической борьбы в Армении и Киргизии — все эти факторы оказывали влияние на деятельность ЕАЭС в прошлом году и в начале 2021 года. Тем не менее, экономические трудности и политические события в отдельных странах, стремление внерегиональных государств оказать влияние на элиты постсоветских государств не изменили внешнеполитические приоритеты стран-участников ЕАЭС.

Ключевые слова: Евразийский экономический союз, евразийская интеграция, Россия, Белоруссия, Казахстан, Киргизия, Армения, США

Для цитирования: Жильцов С.М. Борьба за Евразию. *Проблемы постсоветского пространства.* 2021;8(1):8-19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24975/2313-8920-2021-8-1-8-19>

Статья поступила: 04.03.2021

Принята в печать: 16.03.2021

Опубликована: 27.03.2021

Fighting for Eurasia

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Abstract: Russia and non-regional States have recently shown fresh interest in the countries of the former Soviet Union. The rivalry between Russia and the United States for the post-Soviet territory, beginning after the collapse of the USSR, has broken new ground. Russia considers the post-Soviet space as an area of vital interests. Economic and political relations with its neighbors, the internal political situation in the former Soviet Republics have a direct impact on the development of Russia. These determinants can explain the renewed interest in Eurasian integration and an integration project — the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). However, the USA hardly welcomes such aspirations of Russia and the support for the integration project on the part of some post-Soviet countries. The American side has no interest in the newly emerging regional centers of influence in the post-Soviet space, regarding this as a threat to its interests. Countering the development of Eurasian integration and strengthening the EAEU influence is the focus of US policy in this regard. The EAEU member countries are consistently taking steps to develop integration despite obstacles from the West. The long-term objectives, defined in various documents by the countries, should put them on a new path of economic cooperation. Eurasian integration faces a number of difficulties along with the successes, achieved since the creation of the EAEU. The world economy problems, in addition to internal ones, exert a considerable influence. They intensified after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, which negatively affected the development of the EAEU countries.

The internal political problems faced by the EAEU countries adversely affect integration. The internal political crisis in Belarus, beginning in the later 2020, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh, worsened internal political struggle in Armenia and Kyrgyzstan are the factors that influenced the work of the EAEU last year and early 2021. Nevertheless, economic difficulties and political events in specific countries, the pursuit of non-regional states to influence the elites of the former Soviet states have not altered the foreign policy priorities of the EAEU member states.

Keywords: Eurasian Economic Union, Eurasian integration, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, USA

For citation: Zhiltsov S. S. Fighting for Eurasia. *Post-Soviet Issues*. 2021;8(1):8-19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24975/2313-8920-2021-8-1-8-19>

Received: 04.03.2021

Revised: 16.03.2021

Published: 27.03.2021

INTRODUCTION

Western policy since the collapse of the USSR has focused on extending the sphere of influence in the newly independent States. The developed states were in want of the ex-USSR countries solely as a raw materials appendix and cheap labor which figured on becoming equal participants in modern world politics through geopolitical maneuvering as well, ultimately weakened their positions, led to economic losses and the forfeit of sovereignty.

The mechanism for the collapse of the USSR in the form of the CIS in real-world contexts created conditions for weakening the positions of political elites. Their approaches to managing the relationship with the most industrialized countries sat well with the West, which in a short time specified the subordinate nature of relations for the newly independent states part. The equal manner in bilateral relations, declared at the first stage of the relations, quickly transformed into the West dominance. This was due to the lack of a clear prospects understanding for their development from the political elites of the newly independent states that came to power, economic weakness aggravated by the rupture of industrial relations. The ideas of national revival, considered in the new states as an alternative to party ideology and dominated in the institutions of power, affected the situation.

Political statements by the West about adherence to policies aimed at supporting the economic development of the newly independent states were notable for their pompous rhetoric. The developed countries were not interested in the emergence of powerful countries

in the post-Soviet space that could compete with Western companies and act as a center for reintegration. Moreover, the West was no incentive for forging integration groupings in the post-Soviet space, that could sustain barriers to promoting economic interests and offer development alternatives. Due to its industrial potential, territory and military-political capabilities, Russia was the main contender for its authority as a hard core of the integration groupings. This explains the beginning of the geopolitical rivalry that took place between Russia and the West shortly after the collapse of the USSR. Therefore, the West perceived with suspicion and wariness all Russia's efforts aimed at creating integration groupings, establishing close political and economic relations with neighboring states, recovering lost ground during the collapse. This pushed the West to increase political and then economic pressure on Russia. Using different leverage power, Western countries have consistently strengthened their positions in the post-Soviet space, impeding Russian impact.

UNDERWAY TOWARDS EURASIAN INTEGRATION

The ideas expressed by the First President of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev in 1994 on Eurasian integration were not implemented. The countries of the post-Soviet space were busy creating political systems, combating economic and social problems. All integration ideas were viewed as a threat to the sovereignty of the newly independent States. Nevertheless, Russia and some of the post-Soviet countries

discussed and implemented integration projects. The Union State of Russia and Belarus, the Eurasian Economic Community showed the post-Soviet countries willingness to cooperate in the economic sphere. However, it was an integration project within Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, which could be the most ambitious one. These countries supported the idea of forming the Common Economic Space (CES). The corresponding agreement was signed in September 2003. However, Ukraine strongly criticized the signing of the document. As a result, Kiev refused to participate in the implementation of the integration project.

The challenge of reintegrating the post-Soviet space was one of the key ones for Russia. The increase of the foreign political influence of non-regional states, the reorientation of economic ties and the willingness of the newly independent States to join ultimately Euro-Atlantic structures posed a threat to Russia's interests. On the other hand, the West's policy was aimed at increasing its influence in the post-Soviet space with the prospect of squeezing Russia out. The increase in integration projects implementation has become relevant for Russia after the events in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003–2004. Politicians, who came to power in these countries, adjusted their foreign policies towards expanding cooperation with the West arising anti-Russian rhetoric in these countries. There was a reason on the back of increased influence of Western states in Georgia and Ukraine in 2005 that the Russian president in his address to the Federal Assembly not only drew attention to the fact that the collapse of the USSR was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century, "but also stated that Russia was "interested in synchronizing the pace and specification of reform processes in Russia and the states of the Commonwealth" [1].

The assessments of the Russian president drew criticism from the expert Western com-

munity. Mr. Putin statement was seen as "a desire to restore the USSR by deepening integration with the former Soviet republics" [2].

Later, V. Putin outlined his position on a matter in the article "A new integration project for Eurasia — the future that is being born today", published in 2011. According to V. Putin, who served as prime minister at that time, "an economically logical and balanced system of partnership between the Eurasian Union and the EU could create real conditions for changing the geopolitical and geo-economic pattern of the entire continent and would have an undoubted positive global effect" [3]. In addition, V. Putin noted that "we propose a model of a powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles for the modern world and at the same time playing the role of an effective" bridge "between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region" [4].

The presidents of Belarus and Kazakhstan also spoke out in support of the integration association. The positions of these countries were defined by their high dependence on cooperation with Russia. In particular, the Belarusian economy "was heavily dependent on its eastern neighbor" [5]. "More than half of Belarus' foreign trade turnover was provided by Russia, a quarter of bank assets were controlled by Russian financial groups, and more than half of foreign debt over the past decade was attracted from Russia" [6]. A similar situation was found in relations between Russia and Kazakhstan. This enhanced interest of the three countries in deepening trade and economic cooperation.

In February 2012, the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) began to work, and in May a work plan for the drafting Treaty on the EAEU was approved. Then, in 2012–2014, Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan signed additional agreements to develop the Customs Union and the Common Free Market Zone.

In a sign of extensive preparation for enhanced economic cooperation between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, negotiations on Ukraine's accession to the Customs Union were difficult and fruitless. The Ukrainian side sought to participate in the Customs Union exclusively on its terms and at the same time pursued a course of accession to the European Union [7]. The West exerted great pressure on the Ukrainian authorities and sought to prevent the reintegration of the most economically developed countries of the post-Soviet space led by Russia.

Despite the opposition of the West and a powerful opposition to integration initiatives within Ukraine, Russia did not abandon its attempts to influence the position of Kiev. However, the Ukraine position, which since 2010 had taken a course towards signing an agreement with the EU on associated membership, remained unchanged. Viktor Yanukovich, the country's president at that time, expanded cooperation with the EU and the United States, concurrently, maintaining close trade and economic relations with the countries that formed the Eurasian Economic Union. The negotiations ended in vain, and after February 2014, when the power in Ukraine changed, the Ukraine's accession to the EAEU became irrelevant.

To disrupt integration projects, the West traded on the difficulties that existed in the countries of the post-Soviet space. First of all, the influence was exerted on the political elites that waged an internal political struggle, defending, among other things, different foreign policy priorities. For this reason, Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan were discussing the principles of the new integration association in the long run, examining its activities, positive and negative factors from an internal political struggle perspective. The West accounted for the differences in national legislation, which made it difficult to "formulate unified principles of tax and customs administration" [8].

Finally, all the countries of the post-Soviet space strove to defend their national interests and were not ready to give up part of their sovereignty. In addition, Belarus and Kazakhstan avoided the political component of the integration association, "reducing substantially its potential as a political entity" [9].

EAEU GENESIS

The meeting of minds on creating a multilateral model of cooperation between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus ended on May 29, 2014, when the parties signed the agreement on the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Article 4 of the Treaty defines the goals of the organization as follows: "creating conditions for the stable economic development of the member states thereby improving the population's living standards; striving to form a single market for goods, services, capital and labor resources; fully modernizing, cooperating and boosting national economic competitiveness in the global economy" [10].

The governing bodies of the EAEU (the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council and the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council), the Eurasian Economic Commission and the Court of the Eurasian Economic Union, inherently supranational, were formed. Thus, the Eurasian Economic Commission is a permanent body that "carries out legal regulation of Eurasian economic integration and is endowed with supranational powers to issue decisions for the EAEU member states" [11].

The creation of the EAEU took place against the backdrop of adverse processes in the economies of the EAEU member states. The dominant headwinds in the economies of the countries of the Customs Union / Common Free Market Zone in 2014 were a growth retardation, uncertainty, and instability [12].

US-led Western countries had a major influence on the development of the EAEU [13]. After the collapse of the USSR, Washington

exerted efforts to preserve the post-Soviet space defragmentation and prevent Eurasian integration. Back in 2012, when specific steps to develop Eurasian integration were discussed and debated, Hillary Clinton, then US State Secretary, said that Washington would try to identify appropriate responses to slow down or prevent the development of Eurasian integration” [14].

Geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West intensified after the events in Ukraine. The reason for a sharp deterioration in relations between Russia and Western countries was the entry of Crimea into Russia in March 2014. If before that period the West sharpened criticism of Russia, while simultaneously making efforts to expand its influence in the post-Soviet space, then the policy of the West changed dramatically. The US and EU stepped up their criticism of Russia. The West went in for imposing sanctions against Russia, which sought not only to create the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), but also make it an effective instrument of its policy in the post-Soviet space. The clash of interests between Russia and the West led to a further aggravation of relations between them. Western countries viewed the advancement of the integration project as a threat to their interests.

Russian aspirations run counter to the US interests. The American side considered the post-Soviet space as a key region in which it could put more pressure on Russia. The EU was negative about the idea of integration unification under Russian control. The creation of the EAEU, which included two Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), and which had its own legal and economic agreements, was viewed as a constraint to the implementation of the EU long-term interests in the post-Soviet space [15].

Anti-Russian sanctions introduced by Western countries prompted Russia to further develop relations within the post-Soviet space,

creating additional conditions for expanding trade and economic relations between the EAEU member states. On the other hand, the EAEU countries saw advantages in the integration project that contributed to their economic development and socio-economic stability. Thus, the EAEU countries have been formulating further plans designed to expand and strengthen cooperation in the integration association. The Eurasian Economic Commission has been discussing issues related to the further expansion of trade and economic cooperation within the EAEU.

ECONOMY AND THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

In 2020, the main fighting for dominance in the post-Soviet space was still taken place between Russia and Western countries, which pursued a drive to limit Russian influence. The West sought to act against Russia by employing sanctions, which, for their part, affected other EAEU countries.

The rivalry between Russia and the West for leadership in the post-Soviet space took place in the context of aggravating problems in the global economy and the coronavirus pandemic. In 2020, the GDP of the EAEU countries decreased by 3,3%. The largest drop was in Armenia — minus 6,6%, primarily due to hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, and in Kyrgyzstan — by 6.3% — due to internal political events [16]. At the same time, global GDP declined by 4,6% [16].

Despite the difficulties in economic growth, the impact of the pandemic, the EAEU countries have made some success. “Over the past five years, the dollarization of mutual trade decreased from 25% in 2015 to 19% in 2019. Further increase in the proportion of national currencies in mutual settlements of the EAEU countries would largely depend on deepening their trade and economic relations, as well as on the trading pattern and its diversification” [17].

The introduction of a single currency within the EAEU has been discussed for a long time. However, so far the countries have not come close to solving this issue. The reason lies in fears that the transition to settlements in the Russian currency may limit the sovereignty of other countries. Timur Zhaksylykov, Minister of the Eurasian Economic Commission for Economics and Financial Policy, confirmed the lack of plans to introduce a single currency in February 2021. According to the official, “no agreement within the EAEU, no other act within the EAEU mentions the introduction of a single currency and there are no such plans” [18].

The United States was concerned about the willingness of a series of countries to drive down their dollar dependence. So, in November 2020, during the summit of the EAEU and China, the sides discussed the use of their own monetary and financial settlement system between partners to limit the dollar turnover [19]. Such plans caused concern in the United States, which negatively assessed the creation of such an alliance. This was stated in the report of the research service of the US Congress. In particular, the document emphasized that “many foreign governments, which became the target of US financial sanctions, and their economic partners have increasingly been studying and creating conditions for reducing their dependence on the US dollar” [20].

The EAEU countries have managed to agree on the principles for the further development of the EAEU. In January 2021, the Eurasian Economic Commission adopted a document “On strategic directions for the development of Eurasian economic integration until 2025” (came into force on January 12, 2021) [21]. It identified the key tasks for the EAEU member states in the development of Eurasian integration. In particular, the document emphasized that “the permanent strategic direction is the completely removing barriers and to the maximum reducing exceptions

and restrictions” [21]. At the meeting in January 2021, Russian president emphasized the need to create a “common market for goods, services, capital and labor, as well as a single digital space” [22]. Russian President V. Putin stressed that “most sectors of the economy, common markets have already been created and are working successfully. Preparations are underway to create a common financial market for the EAEU. We have launched a program to create common markets for gas, oil and oil products” [22]. According to the Russian president, “over the six years of the association’s existence, despite the difficult external situation, a lot has been accomplished. In 2019, the mutual trade turnover of the Union states increased by 35% compared to 2015 and amounted to \$ 61,6 billion. The share of the EAEU countries in foreign trade also increased: from 7.8% in 2015 to 8,6% in 2020” [23].

Challenges in the economies of the most developed states did not diminish the interest of the West in the countries of the post-Soviet space. The West is seeking to further defragment the post-Soviet space, reduce the level of their cooperation with Russia and create informal blocs based on anti-Russian sentiments. These tasks determined the directions and approaches of the West regarding the countries of the post-Soviet space. Thus, the West is sensitive to the feelings arisen in the countries of the post-Soviet space. Some countries of the post-Soviet space have developed a consensus among the ruling elite regarding the nature of their relations with Russia and foreign policy implementation.

The priority of the West in the last decade was to support political elites in the countries of the post-Soviet space which were ready to implement an anti-Russian course. That policy was carried out during the US President George W. Bush term. Under the next presidents, such external policies course continued. Under the new US President J. Biden, Western

foreign policy, aimed at supporting the opposition in the post-Soviet countries, has been pursued with continuity. For the West, the task of finding loyal elites in the power, who negatively assess cooperation with Russia, remains an urgent task. This allows the West to count on the successful promotion of its interests in the countries of the post-Soviet space and contain Russia.

Economic challenges are pushing the US to increase its pressure on Russia, oppose the Russian-Chinese rapprochement. "Recent years have been characterized by an exacerbation of trade and economic contradictions between leading economies thereon the shift in «the centers of economic power», which led to a surge in protectionism, escalation of trade wars and the revision of trade agreements" [24]. Specifically, the Sino-American rivalry in the trade sphere has headed up. The US efforts to put pressure on Beijing have failed. At the same time, the Chinese side has gradually been reducing its dependence on the United States.

The West makes active use of democracy field and respect for human rights in its struggle for the post-Soviet space. Interference in the internal affairs of the post-Soviet countries is associated with the promotion of the integration project. It is no coincidence that Alexei Pushkov, chairman of the Federation Council's commission on information policy with the media, noted that "competition in the post-Soviet space is intensifying. ... the Biden administration appears to be betting on the intensification of American efforts to separate the former-Soviet republics from Russia" [25]. The German expert Alexander Rahr shared the opinion and also believed that "along with Biden would people come who supported the" orange revolutions "in the post-Soviet space in the 2000s" [25].

In 2020–2021, the tide was towards coordination the US foreign policy actions with

the EU. The American president, speaking at the State Department, noted: "And we will be more effective in dealing with Russia when we work in coalition and coordination with other like-minded partners" [26]. Such an alliance, initially unequal, pushes Russia to cooperate more closely with China. And although Beijing is consistently expanding its presence in the post-Soviet space, in the face of unrelenting pressure from the West, the Russian-Chinese alliance can provide a basis for the new balance of power.

CONCLUSION

Promotion of the integration project will lead to a sharp strengthening of Russia's foreign policy positions. The EAEU will attract other post-Soviet states. Moreover, European integration is rather difficult for many countries of the post-Soviet space [27].

The EAEU is still at the beginning of its formation. This inevitably generates conflicts between its participants due to clash of their interests. The reasons for this lie in the fact that initially the unification projects were conceived as political or geopolitical formations and the economic consequences were not fully calculated [28]. Nevertheless, the countries of the EAEU are focusing on expanding economic interaction, considering Eurasian integration as a prerequisite for the subsequent development of national economies and a move towards political stability. The prospects for Eurasian integration are topical to the internal political development of the EAEU member countries, as well as their abilities and capabilities to coordinate national interests. It is obvious that the benefits of integration processes can be gained instantly. "The creation of the EAEU opens up chances for stabilization the economic situation in countries participating in Eurasian integration, and in the future, for modernization and industrialization" [29].

The creation of the Eurasian Economic Union is a priority of Russian foreign policy. Reintegration of the post-Soviet space is a prerequisite for the development of Russia.

It reduces the threat of «sanitary corridors» formation around Russian borders, which can limit its potential for influencing the post-Soviet space.

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