

TAJIKISTAN AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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The idea of an independent integrated Central Asian expanse was born when perestroika in the Soviet Union was on its last legs. There was the strong feeling that the crisis of Soviet statehood gave rise to numerous and multiplying challenges that needed to be opposed by all means. For the first time in their Soviet history the local republics were confronted with a very real need to act on their own to cope with the problems created by the Union center's loss of ideological, political, and administrative competence.

In the past, the Central Asian republics developed under Moscow's supervision; the center-initiated perestroika reforms led to a breakdown in economic ties between the region and Moscow. The Central Asian republics found themselves in a quandary; they gradually became convinced that they had reached the point of no return. Under these conditions, the local political elites tried to compensate for the lost economic ties with the center by establishing contacts among themselves. It was tacitly accepted that they would stay within the Soviet Union, while the Union itself would transform (without dropping its Soviet nature) from a unitary into a genuinely federal state (which meant it would acquire the form it should have had from the very beginning). As distinct from the Baltic and some other republics, neither the political community, nor the ruling circles, nor society in the Central Asian republics as a whole wanted any other arrangement prior to August 1991, which brought new political forces to power in Russia. The frantic efforts of the Central Asian republics at the late stage of perestroika to organize regional integration fell through.

The Soviet Union collapsed when the Soviet government was liquidated; the Central Asian republics, one after another, declared themselves independent states. This was done in a hurry under the pressure of fear that the new rulers in Moscow would try to restore pre-Soviet, albeit modernized, order across the still Soviet expanse. After beginning to fill their theoretical independence with real content in 1990 by declaring their national sovereignties within the U.S.S.R., they found this prospect distasteful.

Together with the Soviet Union's disintegration, the region fell apart into smaller units—the newly independent states—causing even worse hardships for the man in the street than the last period of perestroika. The disappearance of the unified state came as a shock—political, social, economic, humanitarian and, not least of all, psychological. No wonder a fairly large share of the local population still looks at restoring a more or less integrated regional expanse as one of the remedies.

At the turn of the 21st century, the development of new realities in Central Asia received a new impetus. In the wake of 9/11, the United States and its Western allies increased and confirmed their political, financial, economic, military, and information presence in the region in the course of the anti-Taliban military operation. This ended Russia's nearly 150-year-long monopoly in the region, urged China, Iran, and other countries to step in, and intensified post-Soviet rivalry among the world powers. The flow of drugs that crosses the region amazed no one: the war against the Taliban sent up drug production in Afghanistan. The repeated attempts to involve the region in globalist projects of all sorts and hues are another everyday reality.

This serves the background for a new dimension of the old idea of an integrated Central Asian expanse. Some forces regard it as a sine qua non for protecting the region against the negative results of the processes unfolding as a direct outcome of the circumstances and events mentioned above. Others, separated from Central Asia by thousands of kilometers, look at integration as a means of protecting their regions and states against the negative developments in the region.

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At this point we should ask ourselves whether there are real prerequisites for a new integrated regional expanse. Those who favor the earliest possible Central Asian integration believe that the conditions absolutely necessary for integration are real: geographic proximity, mutual economic complementarity and mutual dependence, cultural and linguistic proximity, common traditions, and shared historical fates.

The former Soviet Central Asian republics are indeed neighbors, yet this is unimportant. Tajikistan, for example, is Afghanistan's and China's neighbor to a much greater extent than Turkmenistan's and Kazakhstan's for the simple reason that it shares borders with the former and its relations with them at the state level are marred by fewer problems than its relations with some of its Central Asian neighbors.

The economies of all the Central Asian states are the product of Soviet power; in the past, they were part of a common all-Union rather than regional economy. None of the Central Asian republics could boast of a single economic expanse even within its borders. It would be no exaggeration to say that the north of Kazakhstan was economically closer to the Russian regions than to the republic's south. The north of Tajikistan had few contacts with the south: it maintained much closer relations with the neighboring regions of Uzbekistan and even much closer ties with the center of the Soviet state.

Kinship of cultures should rest on a common civilizational platform. In our case, however, the local cultures have at least two such platforms—the Islamic and the Soviet, while the forces that could influence the region's future development are consistently moving away from both. The local peoples are divided by their civilizational affiliations as well: some of them belong to the settled Iranian civilization, others to the nomadic Turkic civilization, while still others to a blend of both. This means that, on the whole, they do not have much in common. As for the linguistic community, they are united by a common Russian language, the language of the former metropolitan country, which they still use when talking among themselves.

Before discussing the community of historical fates we should first define what is meant by community in this case. Do we mean the fact that the Central Asian republics were part of the Soviet Union and that they were lingering in the political (and economic in some cases) backyard of this state; that the "fraternal Slavic republics" did not deem it necessary to inform them of their intention to disband the Soviet Union; that today they are still living through the initial development stages (each in its own way) as national states, or something else? The above suggests that the prerequisites enumerated above cannot serve as a real integration basis.

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Here is another question: What is the framework of the integration process, if it is possible at all? The broad masses in all the Central Asian republics, which are still Soviet-minded, prefer integration along the familiar Soviet patterns. Smaller population groups that have already rejected the Soviet past yet feel uncomfortable in societies that are gradually going back to their social roots prefer integration along the EU lines; there are also those who would hail an Islamic integrated expanse.

Integration Soviet style is possible under at least the following conditions:

- A single political and economic center strong enough to impose its will on others and influence them;

- A monolithic omnipresent and integrating ideological system able to mould all aspects of life across the integrated expanse and a population ready to accept it;
- Delegation by the integrating (or integrated) states of most of their sovereign rights and powers to the unitary center; to be more exact, the states should abandon their independence, voluntarily or otherwise, to the center.

Obviously, there are no such conditions in Central Asia. Uzbekistan is the only country the economic-demographic potential of which, coupled with its central strategic location and the presence of traditional religious and cultural centers on its territory, can claim the role of a seat of the hypothetical integration process. The other Central Asian states, however, have flatly denied Uzbekistan this role. This is happening, among other things, because the national resurrection conceptions used to create national states in Central Asia (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in particular) have nothing in common. Finally, none of the countries is prepared to delegate even the smallest part of its sovereignty to a potential center, to say nothing of abandoning the status of an independent state altogether.

Integration European style is a voluntary merging of the old and fully developed nation-states bound together by shared political and economic interests, their belonging to the same or very similar civilizational expanses, and their having common ideas, values, and close mentalities. The citizens and political elites of the EU countries look at themselves as an inalienable part of one European society with an identity of its own based mainly on the Western Christian community. At the same time, they are aware of belonging to closely knit national communities.

Until recent times, the “dual identity” of the Europeans within the EU developed without hindrances. This explains why most of them had no qualms about abandoning many of their powers and even sovereignty in favor of the common European center in Brussels completely independent of the largest European powers. They knew that their rights and national specifics were being looked after in the vast expanses of Larger Europe. Nothing of the sort can be seen in Central Asia.

Integration European style is possible among countries which share similar democratic approaches to such problems as the government and the opposition; the government and the economy; the government and the media; the government and civil society institutions, etc. In Europe, the approaches to these and similar issues are very close—something that is absent in Central Asia.

The Central Asian states have just embarked on the road leading to national states; like all other post-Soviet republics looking for their national identities, the process is accompanied by trends that encourage monoethnicity. It will take quite a few years for these processes to reach a certain logical conclusion, for the states to formulate common democratic approaches to many key issues, i.e. to achieve integration European style.

Integration Islamic style is not contemplated by any of the influential political forces in any of the local states. Society is not fond of it either—at least for the time being. What is more, the supporters of all sorts of Islamic integration projects are persecuted under the law, which presupposes imprisonment. To put it bluntly, when brought to court they are accused of conscious rejection of national states for the sake of a certain supra-national integration program. But is this not the final aim of those who support the Soviet-communist and Euro-democratic integration models? No matter what pattern is employed to achieve integration in Central Asia, the process will sooner or later result in the disappearance of national states as we now know them.

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The above suggests two questions: To what extent does the single integrated expanse meet the current national interests of Tajikistan and the Tajiks as an ethnos? To what extent will it suit them in the near future?

During the last few years, the following ideas have been diligently planted in the minds of the Central Asian public by various (Western in particular) forces. Due to intensive globalization, the world is nearing an obviously beneficial era of post-national state development, which means that to rid themselves of the

burden of economic and humanitarian problems, to ensure economic growth, and to introduce democratic institutions capable of protecting human rights and interests, the Central Asian republics should, having passed through the development stage as national states, move on to the next stage as promptly as possible. In other words, it would be in their best interests to leave the stage of national statehood behind.

Back in 1999, when speaking at an international symposium on the problems of development of Tajik statehood organized by the Center of Strategic Research under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, Prof. Arne Seifert of Germany offered a Western idea of the period and pointed out to two key processes. First, the state is losing its national nature; second, the state's functions are shifting from protecting national interests to protecting the rights and interests of individuals. The German professor told the symposium that NATO began bombing Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999 and moved its troops into Kosovo with the single aim of protecting human rights and interests and that the war against Yugoslavia was the first in the "post-national statehood" era. The attempts to justify the wars the West was waging against Afghanistan and Iraq by the need to protect human rights against the states ruled by the Taliban and the BAAS testified to the fact that these ideas have obviously been widely accepted as basic conceptions.

Today, we are at the very beginning of the evolution of the contemporary Tajik nation, which will take a long time to be completed. This means that abandoning national statehood for the sake of regional integration and an integrated common expanse without borders in Central Asia, as well as putting the individual and his rights above national values, are fraught with dire negative consequences for the Tajik ethnos.

Between the collapse of the Samanid state in the late 10th century and the time czarist Russia conquered the larger part of contemporary Central Asia, the Tajiks lived in states ruled by other ethnos. In a situation in which these states were not national states as we now understand them, the Tajik ethnos felt neither oppressed nor downtrodden.

Later, when the Russian imperial authorities organized the Central Asian lands into the Turkestan Territory, launched a well-calculated policy of relying on the non-Tajik ethnos, while marginalizing the traditional political, economic, and cultural centers and areas with Tajik majorities, the status of the Tajiks as an ethnos in Central Asia as a potential seat of resistance to the Russian rulers worsened.

The process became even more obvious when in the 1920s Soviet power dissected the region into several national-administrative units, and later when Soviet republics appeared. In some of them the nation-forming processes were accompanied by deliberate efforts to transform the multinational republics into monoethnic. With respect to the Tajik ethnos, this took the form of consistent "de-Tajikization" of the Tajiks' traditional areas of settlement and self-realization. Throughout most of the 20th century, Afghanistan remained a victim of a similar (yet much less intensive) process that brought the national-ethnic identity of the Tajiks living outside their national-state unit to the verge of disappearance. In the post-Soviet period, when the local republics became independent states, the situation became even worse.

"De-Tajikization" in Central Asia has become possible in places where Tajiks live in compact groups outside their own state. We can expect that if the national states in Central Asia disappear under pressure of the calls to "post-national state development," "de-Tajikization" will spread to Tajikistan proper. The region is dominated by ethnos that are ethnically and linguistically different from the Tajiks. This means that in the absence of their own national state, the Tajiks will be deprived of their national-ethnic identity, an ethnic catastrophe for the entire ethnos. Therefore, Tajiks should treat with utmost caution all calls for Central Asian integration (and should be even more suspicious of the calls to speed up the process), irrespective of their sources.

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It is probably not a mere coincidence that the West, Germany in particular, insists on accelerated integration of the local states, which should, according to the integration enthusiasts, leave behind the stage of national states as promptly as possible. Indeed, it is the well-known German foundations—Friedrich Ebert and Conrad Adenauer—that are initiating and sponsoring most of the conferences and

seminars on the subject in Central Asia. They are closely associated with the two major parties of the Federal Republic of Germany—the SDPG and CDU/CSU, which take turns at the helm.

When actively promoting the idea of a single Central Asian expanse, Western supporters of the idea insist that their continued development as national states does not allow the local countries to successfully deal with the overripe economic and political issues. Without a rapid economic revival, they argue, the urgent social problems will be never settled; they add to social and political tension and lead, in the final analysis, to negative developments.

In fact, Western attention to the Central Asian integration issue is prompted by the West's two major aims: first, to weaken the region's dependence on Russia and, second, to prevent the forces guided by Islamic values from coming to power. The West is merely trying to ensure its own security and realize its political and civilizational interests, not only by limiting Russia's influence in the region, but also by preventing a dual (national and Islamic) identity from cementing its position in Central Asia.

Sympathies for all the forms of regional integration imposed from the outside deprive the national states of any future; they undermine the conceptions of national resurrection that have so far been serving the cornerstone of national statehood in all Central Asian countries. No matter how vague and amorphous, the above serves as a practical, even if not formalized, state ideology in all the regional states. They are concentrating on restoring their lost statehoods by establishing continuity between the present and the past, when these ethnoses flourished in their own states. This is completely true of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the political elites of which, when talking about restoring continuity, have in mind the Samanid state and the state of Tamerlane and his successors, which were Islamic states.

Those who side with the Westernized integration model, be it the Soviet-communist or the Euro-democratic, while holding forth on a single Central Asian expanse, are in fact insisting on uprooting the Islamic civilizational elements in the Central Asian republics; those who insist on the Islamic version reject the national elements. In both cases, those who favor regional integration clash with the ideologies of national resurrection and with one of its most important elements—the idea of continuity between the national states and the allegedly national states of the past.

To sum up I would like to point out that Tajikistan will profit from integration that does not threaten the Tajik ethnos' continued existence. When viewed in this light, the model of an integrated expanse populated by Tajiks and kindred ethnoses looks much more attractive. In practical terms, this means closer relations between Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. These countries have everything they might need: energy fuels, natural resources, communication lines with access to the sea, and a potentially diversified economy. Finally, they have a common culture and speak the same language.

So far, the more or less different mentalities of the nations of the three countries and their different political cultures, largely due to Tajikistan's Soviet past and the way it is treated in Afghanistan and Iran, have been interfering with positive developments in the required direction. Gradual yet consistent "de-Sovietization" of Tajikistan will finally convince the two countries to abandon their idea of the republic as a semi-Soviet state: the burden of the Soviet past will disappear over time. Stronger ties at all levels (especially in the business community and the elites) can, and probably will, help to overcome the still existing differences and obstacles. This will create prerequisites (psychological as well as others) indispensable for bi- and trilateral contacts. Trilateral contacts at the ministerial and parliamentary levels, as well as at summits, have become routine. It seems that this process, which is similar to that going on among the Turkic-speaking states, will become or might become even more intense in the near future.

Neither encouraging a comprehensive regional integration process, nor merely talking about a single Central Asian expanse meet the interests of the republic and the Tajik ethnos at present for political and other reasons. This issue can only be discussed in Tajikistan when it develops into a strong, independent, and fully developed state with a stable national identity. Until then, it would be wiser to develop bilateral contacts.