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ETHNOCENTRISM AND THE PROBLEM OF CENTRAL ASIAN INTEGRATION: CURRENT STATUS

ABSTRACT

The article describes the problem of regional integration in Central Asia. Integration is an especially topical issue in the context of current global trends of uniting regions into organizations that promote cooperation in various areas of interest. The authors advance a thesis that in the case of states such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, or Turkmenistan such process will not start in the foreseeable future, if at all. On the one hand, there is the deterring factor of a division into post-Soviet and Islamic states; on the other hand, it transpires that these states aspire towards domination rather than cooperation. Undoubtedly however, the prospect of the development of the Central Asian region as an integrated whole could influence the international arena.

Key words

Central Asia, regional integration, prospects of development in Asia, region stability

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł opisuje problem integracji regionalnej w Azji Centralnej. Kwestia ta jest niezwykle aktualna w kontekście bieżących tendencji światowych dążących do scalania regionów w organizacje o różnego typu ścisłej współpracy. Autorzy stawiają tezę, iż w przypadku państw takich jak Kazachstan, Kirgistan, Uzbekistan, Tadżykistan czy Turkmenistan proces ten nie nastąpi w najbliższych latach lub w ogóle. Z jednej strony przeszkodą jest podział na państwa poradzieckie i islamskie, z drugiej zaś w coraz większym stopniu uwidaczniają się dążenia państw do dominacji, a nie kooperacji w regionie. Niewątpliwie jednak perspektywa rozwoju regionu środkowoazjatyckiego jako spójnej całości może wpłynąć na kształt systemu międzynarodowego.

Słowa kluczowe

Azja Centralna, integracja regionalna, perspektywa rozwoju Azji, stabilność regionu

In connection with advancing projects of creating a horizontal Central Asian zone, the question appears of whether there are actual prerequisites for shaping a new common regional space. Proponents of quick integration of the Central Asian states believe that there already are various grounds in place that are necessary to create such a zone in Central Asia based on the fundamental aspect of “affinity of historical destinies” of the region’s states and peoples.

Indeed, the republics of once-Soviet Central Asia are neighbors. But, that fact doesn’t account for much. For instance, Tajikistan is to a much greater extent a neighbor of Afghanistan and China rather than of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. It has common borders with the former. However, Tajikistan has fewer problems with them at the state level than with some of its post-Soviet neighbors, in particular, Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, the present-day economies of the states in the region cannot be defined as interconnected. As for any affinity of cultures, we can refer to it only if those cultures share a common civilizational platform.

Nowadays, the region’s cultures are based on at least two platforms – Islamic and Soviet ones. But, forces capable of defining the development of the countries in the region appear to shun both of them. At the same time, the fact that some Central Asian nations belong to the Iranian-type agricultural civilization and others to the Turco-nomadic one is what divides them. In this sense, they generally do not have much in common. Moreover, the very discussion of a common language is of a dual nature.

We can suppose that the Russian language is what meant when a common language is discussed. But, there is a very special attitude towards it in the region. Numerous autochthonous forces see in it a hidden threat for the development of a post-Soviet national identity. Correspondingly, in the region, they hope that the language would lose its importance rather than gain additional momentum for strengthening its positions within the framework of realizing integration projects. On the other hand, the Tajik elite, for instance, tends to suspect that in the planned common integrated zone – predominantly Turkic – behind the definition of the common language there may be an aspiration to accept a Turkic language as the common one.

Not everything is quite clear about the affinity of historical destinies of the region’s states and nations either. Here, at the very minimum, it’s necessary to come to terms about the meaning of this affinity. Apparently, leaders of each Central Asian country – who generally define the future of the integration project – have their own specific vision and understanding of this very “affinity of historical destinies.”

From all of the above, the given premises cannot be a real foundation for the development of integration processes in the region. A question arises concerning to which extent the formation of a common, integrated zone truly satisfies the national interests of Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, for example, as a nation and ethnos – at least, in the current and foreseeable future.

Since the process of forming modern title nations is just starting to develop and is not going to be completed soon, creating an international, borderless zone in Central Asia, especially in case of Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, is fraught with negative consequences. There is a possibility that those republics will be penetrated by the process of “de-Tajikization” and “de-Kyrgyzization” of the territories historically inhabited by Tajiks and Kyrgyz and who were left beyond the present-day borders of those republics after the national-territorial delimitation of the 1920s. This prospect is quite real and makes the idea of a quick regional integration unacceptable both for Tajiks and Kyrgyz.

The formation of an integrated, i.e. united, zone in Central Asia will, by its very nature, be accompanied by a refusal of states (albeit, not always) to cede significant sovereign authority and activities to the charge of supranational bodies. With the development of the integration process, these bodies will aspire to broaden their influence at the expense of national states’ authority. In Central Asian conditions, a speedy integration is likely to make the national interests of the states with powerful economies a higher priority, above those of the other states, for the supranational bodies. From this point of view, neither Kyrgyzstan nor Tajikistan can compete with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, or even Turkmenistan. Therefore, from the position of the ethnocratic political elite of Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, it is quite obvious that today’s hasty integration of these countries into a common Central Asian zone doesn’t satisfy their specific national interests.

Besides that, the utility of the rapid development of integration processes for Kazakhstan, as a country that is constantly putting forward various integration projects, and Kazakhs, as an ethnos, appears rather problematic. A dynamic and high level of economic development is not enough for guaranteeing the security of any Central Asian country and, most importantly, the ethnic security of its title population. In the latter instance, the size of an ethnos, the degree of its realization of ethno-civilizational identity, and its preparedness to protect it are equally important.

Nowadays, the population of Kazakhstan is just 16 million people. Half of the population is Kazakh. The majority has problems with their own ethno-civilizational identity. Kazakhstan’s neighbors have such problems to a far

smaller extent, or they do not seem to have that kind of issue at all. Could the creation of a common, integrated zone in Central Asia under these conditions simply turn out to be a prelude to the process of ethnic reformatting – “de-Kazakhstanisation” – of Kazakhstan itself in the sense of losing ethnic identity by the Kazakh part of the population?

In the eyes of the ethnocratic elite of the Central Asian states, a sympathetic attitude to all forms of regional integration means nothing less than hacking the roots nourishing the very process of creating and safeguarding future development of national states in the region and undermining conceptions of national revival which comprise the foundation of statehood of the Central Asian countries today. Despite their hazy and amorphous nature, these concepts constitute a practical but by no means formalized state ideology of all of the Central Asian states. Their essence is the idea of restoring the once lost statehood and continuity between the present-day revived state of any ethnos and the previous state of this ethnos in the period of its greatest might and prosperity. This situation occurs in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, where political elites that talk about the restoration of state continuity undoubtedly mean restoring continuity with the states of the Samanids and Timurids respectively.

We should mention that the formation of nation states after the collapse of the USSR has been accompanied by a radical revision of history. It occurred with the rejection of the communist interpretation of history and was replaced by the sovereign imperial model with the national conception of history model. In the course of this process, national historical schools have been formed fast and national histories have gained the status of official historiographies. The majority of historians that were working in the Soviet times, however, still view history as an ideological tool directed by state authorities. That is why, without any objections, they began to serve the needs of new ruling elites concerned with legitimizing their government. As a result, many conflicts connected with ethnocratic interpretation of wars and colonization, as well as division of historical and cultural heritage, have arisen since the middle of the 1990s.

In general, modern history distinguishes itself with a clear strengthening of ethnocentrism; that is, a research approach with a fixation on the traits of its ethnic group down to highlighting ethnonational factor as a basic criterion of historical cognition.

The given problem is of a particular significance in the countries of Central Asia for architects of the region's post-Soviet division to substantiate their initiatives by historical and cultural reasons above all others. It could be treated as an unavoidable disease of the newly independent states' growth had it not been

for its extremely serious consequences seen as growing tension in the relations between states with growing potential of conflicts inside the region to result in a slowdown of regional integration in all of its aspects.

The complexity of the main problems linked with the formation of national histories in the Central Asian states and directly influencing the development of modern geopolitical situation in the region has already been outlined.

- History is viewed first of all as a national idea, and historical experience is interpreted exclusively from ethno-national positions. As a result, its scientific character is lost as history stops being a science, turning into art, politics, even journalism. Textbooks and manuals on history are used as a political instrument for ethnocratic elites.
- A hypertrophied emphasis is made on the necessity of total modernization and elimination of distortions in the interpretation of history. And, since there had been no national states in Central Asia before the USSR and the ethnic component of the population's identity had been far less important than confessional, regional, or cultural ones, then it is impossible to write an ethno-oriented history without employing distortions or fabrication of historical events and phenomena.
- There are differences between the methodological approaches of historians in the countries with Turkic populations – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, where national histories are being worked out as territorial histories. This is an approach in which every historical name and artifact concerning the territory of an ethnos' inhabitancy is admitted as a part of its cultural heritage. The differences between the methodological approaches in the historical science, along with nationalism a priori, create the foundation for conflicts.

CIS politicians, who in 2005 signed the Declaration on the Formation and Development of a Common Scientific-Educational Space of the CIS Countries, also realize the danger of conflicts linked with the nationalization of history. In late 2005, a conference of the heads of CIS countries' historical institutions took place in Moscow. The conference raised the problems of textbooks and educational literature that were influenced by the revision of history in the post-Soviet countries. The conference recommended increasing the role of the academic historian community in the preparation of textbooks and creation of expert councils made up of the most reputable scientists and teachers. Additionally, a decision was made to create an association of historical institutes of the CIS countries and conduct seminars for young scientists as well as

exchange and training programs for historians. However, this initiative has not bore significant fruit yet.

When talking about the creation of a common Central Asian space, proponents of westernized integration models, such as the Soviet model or the EU, mean first and foremost a deviation from the Islamic roots of the present-day states of the region. Proponents of various Islamic integration models actually do not accept their national component. In both of those cases proponents of regional integration clash with the national revival ideologies and their essential component – the idea of continuity between the present-day national states and the allegedly national states of the past. For the Central Asian states, the creation of an integrated space can have a substantial meaning, but only if it doesn't threaten the authority of a title ethnos' elite.

If to approach the given problem from the point of view of the ethnocratic Tajik elite, then the project of forming an integrated zone inhabited by Tajiks and other ethnic groups kin to them can be considered most promising. In the practical sense, there can be a possibility to develop closer relations between Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. These countries have everything they need – energy resources, natural mineral resources, infrastructure that provides access to the sea, and opportunities to create a diversified economy. And finally, they really are united by a common culture and language. In the opinion of the largest part of Tajik political elite, the strongest factor hampering the development of the necessary processes is Tajikistan's Soviet past; certain differences in the mentality of these countries' peoples; their political culture, which is largely conditioned by the republic's Soviet past; and the attitude to this past in Afghanistan and Iran. As the process of de-Sovietization develops in Tajikistan and its perception as a still semi-Soviet republic changes in Afghanistan and Iran, the imposition of the Soviet past on the present is going to decline. Increasing ties at all levels, especially at the level of business communities and elites, can and, most probably, will facilitate the current differences and obstacles being overcome. And, this will lead to the formation of the necessary foundations, including psychological ones, for intensifying bi- and trilateral ties. Trilateral ties at the ministerial level, as well as through parliamentary summits and meetings of the heads of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Iran have already become a daily routine. Apparently, this process is analogous to the respective process in the relations between the Turkic states and may develop to a still greater extent in the near future.

As to the formation of a common zone in Central Asia, it seems that, at this time and in the current political and socio-economic environment of the

region, not only is stimulating the broad and comprehensive process of regional integration, but also simply posing such a question itself doesn't correspond to the ethno-political interests of most Central Asian elites. The idea of regional integration can become applicable to some extent only after the transformation of the Central Asian countries into developed, genuinely independent, and well established states with a stable national identity. Until the emergence of these indispensable premises, the relations between the states of the region are going to develop predominantly on bilateral and, as a maximum, tri- or quadrilateral basis without creating any supranational bodies having significant independent authority.

Of course, no one has ever doubted the necessity of integration in Central Asia. However, solving this problem in practice appears more and more distant, if at all possible. The following factors exacerbate the situation.

- Problems with state borders, such as their unjustifiably strict regime and landmines, remain unsolved. The existence of ethnic enclaves is another source of instability.
- The water problem cannot be quickly resolved. Theoretically, using water could serve as a basis for a constant and productive dialogue, a motivation for coordinating joint efforts, and, finally, peaceful coexistence. However, the distribution and regulation of water resources constitutes a subject of contradictions and is used as a means to place pressure on neighbors.
- National-state interests surely prevail over the interests of regional integration. Ruling elites of the Central Asian states often identify their own political and commercial interests with national ones. The relations between states depend directly on relationships between their leaders. Mutual suspicion and distrust have more than once complicated interstate relations.

In the 1990s and at the beginning of 2000s, the prospects of Uzbekistan, which according to its president Islam Karimov, can achieve high positions in world culture, science, technology, and economy, leading to Uzbekistan becoming the integration center in Central Asia looked quite favorable. But, after the tremendous economic leap forward that was recently made by Kazakhstan, Astana has more solid grounds for such claims. In 2007, Kazakhstan took several steps towards Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, after that country left its isolation following the death of the former president, Saparmurad Niyazov, in 2006. And, now, Nursultan Nazarbayev says it is Kazakhstan that can become the economic and financial center in the potential Union of Central Asian states.

However, it's unlikely to mean a chance for regional integration. In any case, it's hard to imagine that Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan could feel comfortable under the wing of either Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan, or that the latter two would put up with their mutual domination. And surely, no state would ever agree to play the role of the little brother. The problem of security for each country is almost inevitably solved at the national level. In case of a threat to the ruling regime of any Central Asian country, its neighbors, motivated by the necessity to maintain stability, are unlikely to give it a hand.