

## Kazakhstan and Its Practices of Integration: (Re)Considering the Case of the Eurasian Economic Union

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### Abstract

This paper discusses and analyses Kazakhstan's integration practices in the post-Soviet space. It is argued that Astana's active participation in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is linked to the significance placed on being "Eurasian" within Kazakh state identity. As such, the EEU should not be seen as solely driven by Russia as is often assumed. Kazakhstan is playing an essential function within the formation and development of this organisation.

### Eurasian Integration—the Power of Identity

On 29 January 2014, the official 'Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2014–2020' was adopted. This document was developed in relation to the new 'Strategy—2050' outlined by Nursultan Nazarbayev in his annual address to the nation in 2012. This new foreign policy concept lays out a number of principles that are said to be in line with national interests. Among these are: preservation of national security; strengthening of peace in the international and regional arenas; and diversifying Kazakhstan's economic development. Interestingly, the official document also places a great emphasis on the socio-cultural dimension of Kazakhstan's foreign policy. Therefore, promoting Kazakh culture, language and tradition within the many Kazakh-speaking communities abroad has become an inherent part of Kazakhstan's foreign policy direction. The document also attaches great importance to the role of Kazakhstan within the broader Central Asian region, which is deemed as of great importance and worthy of protection from transnational threats, such as organized crime, drug trafficking, terrorism and religious extremism.

In outlining these priorities, it positions Eurasian economic integration as priority number two for Kazakhstan's external politics. This shows that the official political elite consider the Eurasian integration as at the core of Kazakh foreign policy. In the light of this, the political elite are determined to support deeper integration between Kazakhstan, Belarus and Russia within the Customs Union and the Common Economic Space. Both integration efforts are viewed as building blocks of the larger and deeper union of the EEU. Twenty years ago at Lomonosov Moscow State University, Nazarbayev gave a speech outlining his vision of an Eurasian Union as a union of equal sovereign states with integrated and coordinated economic and political structures. This speech laid the foundation not only for Kazakhstan's foreign policy, but also for the way in which Kazakhstan sees itself and locates itself within the broader geopolitical order.

Being firmly and deeply interlinked with southern Siberia, Kazakhstan, in traditional Soviet classifications, was never considered part of what was known before the collapse of the USSR as 'Middle Asia', which consisted of the Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republics. It was not until 1993, when the Central Asian Summit took place and the region was renamed 'Central Asia' that representations of this region began to include Kazakhstan. Following the summit, Nazarbayev expressed uncertainty about how to locate Kazakhstan on the international map. Indeed, in the early years of Kazakhstan's development as a newly independent state, the political elite struggled to outline a state identity for Kazakhstan that would appeal to its multi-ethnic society. Drawing on a discourse about 'Eurasia', Nazarbayev has made every practical effort possible to explicitly situate Kazakhstan as between Europe and Asia, and represent it as one of the bridges linking the two continents. Nazarbayev's understanding of Kazakhstan as a 'Eurasian state' was reflected in his proposal for the creation of the 'Eurasian Union' in 1994.

The concepts of 'Eurasia', 'Eurasian State', 'Eurasian Bridge', and 'Eurasian Space', are inherently open and flexible, since they mix two spaces—Europe and Asia—that are both contested in their nature. When asked where Kazakhstan is, one might give one of several answers: Kazakhstan is in Asia; it is located to the south of Russia; it borders both China and Russia. Using a classical or neo-realist approach, it would be common to respond that the country is locked between Russia (north), China (east), the Caspian Sea (west) and Islamic states (south), and that this location is inherently dangerous and disadvantageous, and, thus, that the newly independent Kazakhstani state should seek to protect itself. It is, however, rare to hear that Kazakhstan is located in Eurasia. Yet, in spite of this, the official representation of Kazakhstan's location—since 1994 and the introduction of the concept of 'Eurasian Union'—is that it is the core state, and centre, of the geopolitical imaginary that is 'Eurasia'. The construction of Kazakh

identity as being a Eurasian state is vital. It is interesting to observe that in a 2013 document outlining the current structures and mechanisms of the Eurasian Economic Community, Kazakhstan is hailed as a state not only located in Central Asia, but also at the very heart of the Eurasian continent. Indeed, positioning Kazakhstan within a specific socio-political space of 'Eurasia' is appealing to and supported by the overwhelming majority of the population.

### **Eurasian Integration and the Cautionary Tale of Ukraine 2014**

Even in the light of the current crisis in Ukraine, and the process that has seen Crimea join the Russian Federation, polls conducted in March 2014 show that 85% of Kazakhstani support the creation and development of the EEU. Furthermore, whilst the entire Western hemisphere regards the Crimean referendum of 16 March 2014 as an illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory by Russia, Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister, Erlan Idrissov, officially stated that the referendum was, in fact, the result of the free expression and choice of the Crimean population.

It would be a mistake to claim that Kazakhstan observed these events without caution, as there were, and still are, concerns about the crisis in Ukraine. But importantly, analysts and political pundits have been warning Kazakhstan against following the Ukrainian example. Official statements about the events in Crimea have mainly revolved around the economic weaknesses of Ukraine. Idrissov offered the view that the Ukrainian scenario is impossible in Kazakhstan, basing his arguments mainly on Kazakhstan's economic development and internal socio-political stability. Furthermore, on 19 March, 2014, it was reported that according to the head of Secretariat at the Eurasian Economic Commission, Askar Kishkembayev, the presidents of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia are scheduled to sign an agreement on the EEU this May in Astana. Kishkembayev also observed that the agreement will enhance conditions for the further development of the economies of the three states, and increase the free flow of goods, services, and labour between them.

But as soon as the argument turns towards the economic benefits of Eurasian integration, the Eurasian Economic Integration stops making much sense from a Kazakh perspective. It has already been claimed by several political, economic and business representatives that Kazakhstan—in comparison to Russia and Belarus—is not experiencing great economic gains from the Common Economic Space. For example, due to the changes within the Customs Union agreement, some exporters and importers in Kazakhstan have suffered substan-

tial losses and disadvantages. Meanwhile, the adoption of Russian tariffs has led to price increases for various goods, such as textiles, electrical appliances and vehicles. Furthermore, there are a number of economic disputes between Kazakhstan and Russia centred on the energy sector. In addition to the economic asymmetries within the EEU, there are also political asymmetries. Nazarbayev, the political elite and other significant figures in Kazakhstan have expressed concern about Russian pressure to turn the EEU into a supranational organisation. Russia's political demands and aspirations regarding the EEU are not particularly welcomed by Kazakhstan, as official statements make clear that any affiliations that might threaten the political sovereignty and independence of Kazakhstan should be avoided.

Various political leaders within Kazakhstan have additionally voiced severe reservations about the EEU, considering it a direct threat to state sovereignty. In the light of events unfolding in Ukraine, Gaini Kassymov, the leader of the 'Party of Patriots', has called for a stop to the process of Eurasian integration and warned of the possible detrimental effects of signing the EEU agreements. This is despite the fact that, according to Nazarbayev, the EEU is a purely economic integration mechanism. He is against political integration within the framework of the EEU, as this process will necessarily threaten the sovereignty of Kazakhstan. In January this year, Nazarbayev clearly tabled his view on the limits to EEU integration, stating that the agreement will be orientated solely towards economic—and not political—integration. He, furthermore, stated that questioning the primacy of state sovereignty was not even being considered and that Kazakhstan would abandon any integration or organisation that threatened its sovereignty.

Azat party members have also expressed their dissatisfaction, asserting that economic integration needs to be realised without having detrimental effects on the national interests of Kazakhstan. Economic practices of integration are seen by them as a direct loss of Kazakhstan's ability to make independent decisions regarding its economic policy. Even Kazakhstani communist leaders have started expressing concern regarding EEU integration. Gaziz Aldemzharov, leader of Communist Party, argues that the EEU must be a union of equal partners. In August 2013, ninety-five representatives of various social, political, economic communities also expressed their concern about the EEU, claiming that beneath the guise of economic integration, it is possible to clearly see the hidden neo-imperial ambitions of Moscow.

Given this scepticism about the EEU, one might start to ask what other options are open to Kazakhstan to advance its economic interests, as alternatives to closer integration with Russia and Belarus. There are certainly

other possible integration scenarios that might be considered. For example, closer integration within 'Central Asia'; integration of Kazakhstan as part of the so-called 'New Silk Road' with the support of the United States; pursuit of a free-trade zone within the framework of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, under the leadership of China; or joining in the formation of a 'New Pan-Turkism' led by Turkey. It is easy to outline various possibilities for Kazakhstan. However, as suggested above, one must also seriously consider the inherent link between the construction of state identity and its pursuit of the foreign policy.

### **Eurasian Economic Integration and the Power of Identity**

For the time being, Kazakhstan is embracing an identity as a 'Eurasian State' and this identity needs to be considered seriously if one wants to understand Kazakhstan's active participation within the integration practices of the EEU. Such integration initially appears to be economic in nature, with a specific political dimension. However, what one needs to further consider is another dimension that is underexplored and almost unnoticed—the socio-cultural dimension of Eurasian integration. Eurasian integration has multi-layered socio-economic and politico-cultural dimensions. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, deep integration processes have taken place, and it is fruitless, if not counter-pro-

ductive, to call for, or even instigate, a process of disintegration. What is necessary is for Kazakhstan to negotiate beneficial terms of integration on various levels, including the economic, political and cultural. Currently, the political elite of Kazakhstan might view the EEU as a comfortable institutional and operational framework. Yet, the comfort may be only limited and temporary, if the example of Ukraine is considered.

Just as the ever-deepening integration process that has been actively occurring over the last several years cannot be easily undone, the identity of Kazakhstan cannot be changed overnight. Identities are flexible and constantly changing, but a process of identity reconstruction is not an easy, unproblematic and always violence-free process. Furthermore, the various geopolitical and rhetorical 'manoeuvres' of Kazakhstan to the end of balancing the interests of powerful neighbours and other states, namely the US, will always raise questions about Kazakhstan's course towards deeper Eurasian integration. Yet, the geo-economic and geo-political existence of the Eurasian Economic Union is undeniable. Furthermore, this organisational setting has also acquired important representation meanings for Kazakhstan's state identity in the years since independence, which in turn constitutes Kazakhstan's decision to participate in Eurasian integrationist practices.

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