

# **Economic Integration in Eurasia; Challenges and Opportunities**

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*Concepts and ideas of economic integration in post-Soviet space are not new or uncommon. Numerous attempts were made to create some form of integration process either by involving most of the former Soviet Republics or on regional basis but there was hardly any success. The purpose of the paper is to review the economic integration process and attempts in the region, their success, failures and lessons learned. The paper highlights the problems, challenges and prospects of economic integration in Eurasia and argues that despite problems and challenges there are objective factors and prospects for success of integration in Eurasia.*

**Keywords:** Eurasia, Eurasian Space, CIS, SCO, Customs Union, Eurasian Economic Union

## **1. Introduction**

Regional cooperation and economic integration is one of the main trends of global development all over the world, and Eurasia is not an exception. However, before discussing the economic integration process, it will be relevant and useful to define the concept of “Eurasia” as the geographic term is often debatable, contentious, elusive and used and understood from different perspectives, ideological contexts and viewpoints.

“Eurasia” is a geographical concept meaning a space and place that is located both in Asia and Europe and in-between Asia and Europe. However, the concept of “Eurasianism” is more complex and has politico-ideological, cultural, security and philosophical connotations with multiple views and perceptions, often conflicting and contradictory meanings (Sharip 2008 & Sengupta 2009). After the collapse of the USSR, other varieties of Eurasianism emerged, like Turkish, Muslim, Ecological-Economic Eurasianism, Eurasianism in Central Asia, Caucasian Eurasianism and so on which are usually attractive to nationalist and conservative politicians, intellectuals and academics and are mainly limited to academic debates and discussion with very little or no support from the public (Mostafa 2013).

“Eurasia” is the largest continent; the combined landmass of Europe and Asia. Sometimes it is used to refer the post-Soviet states, in particular, Russia, the Central Asian republics, and the Transcaucasian republics. For the purpose of the paper, we define Eurasia consisting of post-Soviet states (excluding the Baltic states), including Central Asia and Caucasian republics, and explore the integration efforts and experiments there during the last 25 years; after they got independence in 1991.

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The topic of integration in Eurasia and its challenges is an important and crucial one, but the issue has somehow failed to draw wide and sufficient academic attention, urgency and importance. As a result, there are not too many objective, quality research works in this area. One of the main objectives of the paper is to contribute to the existing literature by adding an objective and unbiased study on the area. The main research questions of the paper are; what are the main attempts and initiatives taken for economic integration in the region? What are the main challenges and difficulties for the success of integration? And, what are the future prospects, if any?

There are three main factors that motivated the author to undertake this research; a) Eurasia is one of the largest and richest regions of the world with huge reserve of oil, gas, gold, uranium and other precious metals and natural resources but the area is under-researched and often overlooked and ignored by researchers and academics from the outside world, b) most of the research is done by regional authors and published in Moscow in Russian language; as a result the outside world has very limited access and understanding about them. Moreover, they are often biased and reflect mainly the interests and policies of the Russian Federation, as the dominant power in the region and in the integration process; c) recently there are number of books, articles, research papers and other publications coming out from the West particularly from Eastern Europe on the subject but most of them are politically biased and highly critical of Russia and its policy towards the integration process. So, there appears to have a shortage or gap in the literature of objective studies and analysis of the integration process and the author believes that this paper will partially fulfil that gap.

The rest of the paper is organized into several sections; Section 2 is the Literature Review where the existing literature in the field is divided into four categories and provides a critical review and analysis; Section 3 is the methodology; Section 4 provides a genesis of the economic integration during the initial years of independence of Eurasian states; Section 5 evaluates the success and failures of the Customs Union (CU), the first major economic integration effort in the region; Section 6 briefly discusses the latest and most advanced effort of economic integration process; the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in 2015; Section 7 looks into the challenges and difficulties faced by the integration process; Section 8 briefly explores the opportunities and future prospects; Section 9 is the concluding one that succinctly summarizes the paper, discusses the implications of the research, and points out the challenges and limitations of the research and provides some guides for further research.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature on the topic is wide, and often with contesting and contradictory views and opinions that can be classified into several broad groups and categories. Instead of reviewing the literature individually, the author has classified them into different categories/groupings that focus on or deal with the topic from similar views and perspectives, and at the end an analysis of each group and its shortcomings will be discussed. First, the authors like, Olcott, Aslund & Garnett (2000), Laurelle (2004), Sengupta (2009), Qoraboyev (2010), Dragneva & Wolczuk (2013), Pyatt (2013) and others focused on the initial ideas, attempts and practices of integration process in the post-Soviet space after the collapse of the USSR. Their focus and priorities are on issues, ideologies and challenges to regional integration and they mainly provide historical, descriptive materials without an in-depth analysis of Eurasian integration process.

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Second, the works of Toakev (2003), Sultanov (2005 & 2009), Astapania (2015), Bykov (2009), Satke (2015), Yesdauletova & Yesdauletov (2014), Putin (2001, 2011), Nazarbayev (1997, 2001, 2003, 2011), Documents and Papers published by the CU and EEU can also be brought into this broad category of literature. These are mainly academics, writers, journalists, political leaders who worked out the detailed policies, perspectives, structures, goals and objectives of the integration process and organizations in Eurasia, particularly the Customs Union (CU) and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). They are mainly from the region and optimistic about the success of integration often ignoring or overlooking the problems, challenges and difficulties faced by their countries.

Third, these are mainly Western authors, experts and specialists from various research institutes and think-tanks who are highly critical of Russia's role and policy in the integration process and blame President Putin and Russian Neo-imperialists for trying to restore Russian control and hegemony in the post-Soviet space. This group is headed by Starr & Cornell (2014), the Editors and contributors of the Monograph "*Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents*" published by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and the Silk Road Studies Program. Other important literatures in this group are the writings of Wisniewska (2013), Manikoff (2013), Horak (2014), Popescu (2014) and others who argue that the goals and objectives of Russia in creating integration organizations by involving post-Soviet states are to control and dominate them and keep them away from the orbit of influence from the West and China. Most of these literature came out during 1913, 1914 and 1915 and they were highly anti-integration, anti-Russian and their findings are highly negative.

The last group of literature is mainly the recent on-line materials by experts, professionals, freelance journalists, bloggers and writers who provide discussion and analysis of the latest political, economic and security developments in the region and their impacts on the integration process (again, mainly negative). Proliferation of anti-Russian and anti-integration articles started to emerge after the Russian occupation of Crimea in March 2014 and its continuous support to separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine. Authors like, Weitz (2014), Michel (2014, 2015) and Schenkkan (2015) belong to this group.

As we observe, materials on the subject are highly polarized and divided; Broadly, the existing literature has two extreme types of findings about economic integration in Eurasia; a) completely negative views and findings mainly from Western literature, particularly those from Eastern Europe who believe that integration cannot succeed in Eurasia or does not have any future mainly because of the lack of political atmosphere and Russian control, domination and influence; b) writers from Russia, Kazakhstan and some other member states of the EEU, who believe that the integration has a future and their findings are always positive and forward-looking (although recently some of them are raising questions regarding the economic benefits because of the economic crisis in Russia). So, the research questions/problems raised in the paper are not dealt with or answered properly. The findings of this paper differ from those of the previous studies; the findings should not be 'either or' but a combined and integrated approach; there are challenges and difficulties, Russian pressure and domination are there but there are also positive factors, new emerging opportunities which could make the integration process a success. The current research attempts to fill up the gap in the literature and answer the research question of what are the challenges and opportunities of integration in Eurasia which the existing literature has so far failed to attend adequately.

### 3. Methodology

A qualitative research methodology is used in writing this paper in addition to a wide range of secondary sources; articles, papers, materials, documents and on-line resources are used, analyzed and consulted. Some of the materials were cross-checked for trustworthy authenticity as views, opinions and perceptions on the topic are so varied and divergent; often contradictory and confusing. As the main methodology is a qualitative one; no research process/design, sample size, models, variables and their justifications are used or applicable for this paper. Critical analysis of secondary sources of published materials, books, journal and magazine articles, documents, speeches by government leaders and on-line materials are also important and useful as they provide historical background of the topic/subject, evolution of knowledge in the field as well as help to understand and locate the gaps and vacuum in the field so that further research can be undertaken to promote and expand the body of knowledge and scholarship. For writing this paper, a plethora of materials published in Russian language are used and analyzed, with the author's own translation, in order to enrich the content of the paper.

### 4. Genesis of Economic Integration Process in Eurasia

The very first attempt at creating political organizations and maintaining economic ties among the former Soviet Republics was taken on December 8, 1991 when the leaders of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine signed an agreement on the dissolution of the USSR and creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as a successor entity and subsequently eight other Republics - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan - signed the Alma-Ata Protocol on December 21, 1991 and joined the CIS. But soon, it turned to be an ineffective and inefficient organization mainly because of political, security and ideological reasons as well as local conflicts, lack of commitments and mutual mistrust and distrust among the leaders. Russia's aggressive policies, political, military and economic pressures and domination made many CIS members disillusioned, unhappy and frustrated. As a protest, some of the Members - Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan - stopped attending CIS meetings and activities on a regular basis which made the organization crippled and gradually irrelevant and dysfunctional (Olcott, Aslund & Garnett 2000).

Subsequent attempts were made in creating other organizations with narrow and specific goals and focus (Zabortseva 2012). In 1994, an important attempt was made to create the Free Trade Zone that never came into force because of Russia's refusal to ratify it. In 1995, Russia and Belarus created the customs union and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan joined later on. In 1999, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan signed a new treaty for Customs Union and the Common Economic Space with the goal of further economic integration. Subsequently, the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (now defunct) was created. In the military sphere the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was created in 1992 by six countries and three others joined later on, which was supposed to work as a counterbalance to the NATO. It started functioning well but failed again because of civil wars, internal and regional conflicts and disputes in regard to Russia's role within it. In the meantime, China took initiatives for creating the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001 as a security, military, economic and strategic organization consisting of China, Kazakhstan,

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Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (Qoraboyev 2010) which, has been functioning well and effectively under the leadership of China (Yuan2010).

The next integration effort was the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) created in 2000 in Astana (Kazakhstan) consisting of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan with specific goals and objectives: creating customs union with a clear mandate to conduct coordinated structural reorganization of individual economies; drawing up and implementing joint programs of economic and social development; creating a common payment system and equal conditions for industrial and entrepreneurial activities; forming a common market for transportation services; establishing a common energy market and so on (Yesdauletova and Yesdauletov 2014).

### **5. Customs Union between Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia**

The EurAsEC had a limited success (Bykov 2009). Nevertheless, the search for regional economic integration in Eurasia did not stop and a Treaty on the Establishment of an Integrated Customs Area and Formation of a Customs Union was signed in 2007, and the related control and regulatory agencies were formed between 2007-2010. On November 27, 2009 Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia agreed to create the Customs Union (CU) that would include the formation of a common customs space by July 2010 which was supposed to pave the way for further integration, resulting in the creation of the Single Economic Space (SES) in 2012, and the Eurasian Union in 2015. The CU was created within the framework of the EurAsEC administered and managed by the regulatory body; Interstate Council (Mezhgossoviet). Since January 2010, the CUC was authorized to make decisions on a number of issues like changing import customs duty rates; maintaining the classification of goods for foreign economic activity; setting tariff exemptions and tariff quotas; defining the system of tariff preference and introducing non-tariff regulations (Krotov 2011).

Among the CU members Kazakhstan was more interested and enthusiastic about the union as it has a close deep-rooted economic, trade and investment relations with Russia mostly in traditional sectors of oil and gas, nuclear energy, maritime, aerospace technology, training and others. There are also geo-economic factors; according to Guschin (2015), in early 2015, seventy-six of the eighty-three constituent Russian entities had economic and business ties with Kazakhstani regions (districts) and trades between them exceeding 1 billion US dollars. More than 200 interregional agreements were signed for 5000 joint ventures. In fact, economic and trade relations among the member states of the CU improved during the initial years as Sultanov and Dodonov (2012) claimed that Kazakhstan earned 700 billion tenge (Kazakh national currency) from customs duties in 2010 compared to 1 trillion 142 billion tenge in 2011. In 1991, the structure of industrial production of Kazakhstan was 84% processing and 10.7% mining but in 2010, the processing industry decreased to 31% and mining increased to 61.5%. After creating the CU, the inflation rate in Kazakhstan in 2012 was the lowest 4.6% during the last 14 years. Foreign investment increased to a record of 19.85 billion US dollars in 2011 particularly in industrial sectors of processing industries, machine building, electrical and electronics industries, transportation and agriculture crucial for modernization of industries in Kazakhstan.

However, it took a dive in 2014 because of economic crisis in Russia, Western Economic sanctions, the crisis of ruble, and sharp decline of oil price in the international market that

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seriously affected the economy of Kazakhstan and forced to devalue its currency twice, which had serious impacts on the import-dependent land-locked country. People blamed Russia and the CU for their economic problems and sufferings. Kazakhstan's trade with Russia decreased drastically while trade turnover with China increased by 20 percent in 1914 (Michel 2014). The situation in Belarus and Russia was even worse. Therefore, the initial hopes and aspirations of the economic success of the CU appeared to have evaporated although the leaders praised the success of the union and portrayed a positive picture of the integration process and results.

### 6. The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)

The leaders of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia went ahead with their pre-destined plan and signed a treaty in Astana on May 29, 2014 to create the EEU effective from January 01, 2015. So, the EEU was born on a cold, gloomy day in Moscow in a somber mood without any fanfare or ceremony as Russia was at war with Ukraine, completely isolated, had lost its seat in the G8 and was under political, military pressures and sanctions imposed by the West.

Moscow was able to quickly convince the two other post-Soviet states - Armenia and Kyrgyzstan-to join the Union. Armenia's joining was a surprise even to Kazakhstan, the most committed and loyal member of the Union. Astana raised the issue that Armenia can only join the EEU without the recognition of the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh with Azerbaijan, but Armenia cultivated a close, friendly relationship with Russia and in the final document this issue was ignored and forgotten. But to join the Russian-led EEU Armenia had to sacrifice its Association Agreement with the European Union which was not easy and highly criticized by the public (Giragosian 2015).

Kyrgyzstan which is a small, poor and weak state in Central Asia joined the EEU mainly for military, security and strategic interests as well as on economic considerations. Although the country used to claim the title of "the island of democracy" in the region, it suffered from chronic ethnic conflicts, civil wars and border disputes with neighboring countries (Trilling 2010). Another important reason for Kyrgyzstan's joining the EEU was to ensure the working of about half million Kyrgyz migrant seasonal workers in Russian and Kazakhstani cities and their remittances amounted about 30% of the country's GDP. There was also a strong believe that joining the EEU will ease the trade barriers of exporting agricultural goods (fruits, vegetables and flowers) to Russia and Kazakhstan (Satke 2015).

The organization of the EEU is, in many ways, inspired by that of the European Union although it differs in many aspects. The EEU has a four-tiered governance structure that is more pyramidal than that of the more diffuse decision-making processes in the EU. The top Administrative body is the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council consisting of the Presidents of all the 5 Member states. The Second decision-making body is the Eurasian Inter-Governmental Council consisting of Prime Ministers and third decision-making body is the Board of the Eurasian Economic Commission, headed by Viktor Khristenko, a former Russian deputy prime minister who is the Chair of the Commission. There are 23 Departments under the Commission headed by Members from different member states. The last one is the Administrative unit consisting of the Advisory Bodies (there are 10 of them) and under each of them there are various Consultative Committees (Eurasian Commission Organization, 2014). From the outside look and structure, it appears that the EEU has made significant progress

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and is functioning smoothly as a successful organization, but in reality the organization faces numerous challenges and difficulties both from within as well as from member states.

### 7. Challenges

First, the role, place and motivation of Russia within the integration process is important but at the same time debatable and controversial. Member states are worried and concerned about real Russian goals, motives and of frequent controversial and radical statements made by President Vladimir Putin and other Russian officials and leaders. Second, there are economic challenges; for any successful integration, it is necessary to have a certain level of economic growth, harmonization of laws and economic policies, creation of supranational bodies and institutions with real power and authority. Russia has a huge reserve of natural resources, a more competitive economy, and comparatively better developed industry in the region, and any common tariff policy will benefit Russia more than those of smaller and poorer countries. Moreover, the member states widely vary in terms of territory, population, GDP, per capita income, growth rate, industrialization and levels of development. Then, for successful economic integration, there is a need for an economic powerhouse who is able and willing to lead and finance the body in times of need and urgency. Like Germany in the EU or USA in the NAFTA but in the case of EEU Russia is neither willing nor able to play that role.

Third, expansion and further integration; the EEU is consisting of only five post-Soviet states and there is hardly any possibility of its further expansion. Tajikistan, one of the poorest, war-torn and landlocked Central Asian countries, expressed interests in joining the Union but its neighbors Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have no interests in joining any Russian-led integration organization, and without their joining the Union Tajikistan will hardly benefit. The participation of Ukraine is also very important as it is the second largest country in Eurasia, after Russia, in terms of population and its strategic location. Russia made numerous attempts to persuade Ukraine into joining the Union but as Ukraine was looking towards joining the EU, it did not take the risk. Now, with the new situation of the Russian occupation of Crimea and its support to separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine that possibility is remote if not impossible.

Fourth, there are internal disputes, claims and counter-claims among the members of the EEU. There are unsettled tariff issues on oil and gas products which may cause future problems because Russia wants exemptions of these sectors, and that was one of the main reasons that the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) could not be created in 2000. There are already concerns that Russia will benefit the most from the Union as it has the more advanced economy, comparatively developed industry and Moscow will become the center of regional financial and business center.

Fifth, the speed and tempo issue of the time limit is also a big concern. Experts and observers cast doubts on whether the Eurasian Union can sustain and maintain the tempo of such a fast and quick growth and development. As mentioned earlier, the CU was created in 2010 and started functioning in July 2011 and within 6 months the leaders decided to elevate it into the SES and transformed it into a full Economic Union in 2015; in terms of organizational structure what it achieved in 5 years, for the EU it took more than 30 years. So, the question is; can it sustain or survive without going through the fundamental legal, economic, political and other changes necessary for success of an integration process?

### 8. Opportunities

Despite the above-mentioned difficulties and challenges, there are positive factors that may help and facilitate the process of integration in the region. First, the Eurasian space is a huge area with rich agricultural, natural and mining resources and it occupies important geo-political and geo-strategic location in the crossroads of several ancient cultures and civilizations. The five member states of the EEU have a population of over 180 million, occupy more than 20 million square kilometers of landmass (about 15% of the world) and has a combined GDP of about 2.5 trillion US dollars (World Bank 2015)

Second, they have an experience of more than 70 years of Soviet history that created a common integrated, dependent and complimentary economy, so any integration process may benefit each member state in some form or other. Moreover, the countries are different in terms of their geography, weather, resources, industrial base, agricultural products and overall levels of development, and cooperation and integration will help and benefit each state in the region.

Third, Eurasian states, including Russia and Central Asian ones, seem to share a common threat perception of terrorism, extremism and religious fundamentalism emanating from within their own societies or coming from Eastern China, Afghanistan and broader Middle East region. So, a common threat perception may bring them closer for political and security cooperation which will eventually bring them closer for economic integration. The recent Sino-Russian military, security and economic cooperation may play a positive role in that direction.

Fourth, after the collapse of the USSR many CIS countries expressed interests and wanted to join the EU and the NATO but except the three Baltic States-Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia- no post-Soviet state was successful in achieving that goal. With the current economic situation in some EU member states, the UK's exit from the EU and overall economic and other social problems and challenges in the Euro region and Europe's relations with Russia, it is unlikely that EU will expand its membership to the East. So, some of the states who have been waiting for a long time to join the EU may be interested in joining a EEU if opportunity comes, as Armenia did.

Last but not least, over the last 25 years, post-Soviet states have gone through numerous attempts and experiments of regional integration processes and they are more experienced, grown up and matured now and their leaderships are more confident and optimistic than before. Although in most countries the old leaderships are still in place, a strong young nationalist elite, mainly educated in Western systems with democratic values and ideals, are emerging in each of these countries and they can bring real changes.

### 9. Findings and Conclusion

The study tries to answer the research questions raised in the beginning and finds that there was no shortage of economic integration efforts in the Eurasian space beginning from the collapse of the USSR. The study described the integration attempts in various stages and critically analyzed the most important ones - Customs Union and Eurasian Economic Union. The study listed and explained the challenges to the economic integration process in Eurasia

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as well as brought out the prospects and opportunities for the success in order to make the research an objective and balanced one.

This paper contributes to the field or subject matter in two major ways; first, as mentioned earlier that there are two extreme views regarding the regional integration in Eurasia; one, mainly supported and propagated by Western authors, is that the regional integration in Eurasia was not a success and will not be one in future because of Russian control, domination and pressure. On the other hand, authors from the region, political leaders and intellectuals, see the integration as a success with a great future. This paper challenges both the views and provides a critical, objective analysis of the topic and thus contributes to the body of knowledge in the field. The findings and conclusions are valid for the time being but rapid political and economic changes and modifications may change them; so further studies and research should be undertaken on this very important topic.

It is expected that the current research will have a number of implications; create further interests and motivations in undertaking research on this important and critical issue; help to reduce the perceptions/misperceptions that there are no future prospects for success of regional integration in Eurasia, and most importantly it will help the readers to get an objective, unbiased and positive views and analysis of the topic.

The main limitation of the study is to find and consult more objective and unbiased data and literature; most of the works are ideologically or politically charged and motivated. There should be more case studies on the subject; the roles and places of individual states into the integration process. As most of the post-Soviet countries are ruled by authoritarian/dictatorial regimes and there are hardly any freedom of press and media, particularly in the member states on the EEU. There must be further studies and research on the area as a whole as well as individual members' perspectives on regional integration and cooperation; regional conflicts and their implications on integration; external factors and reasons affecting the integration process and long-term economic (reduced oil price) and financial impacts and implications on the integration process.

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