

# Integration Process in Central Asia: The Interaction of Nationalism and Regionalism

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## Abstract

After the end of the cold war, Central Asia reappeared in the international community's view and became an important region in geopolitics. The independent Central Asian States have begun to seek regional cooperation in order to maintain regional security and stability and develop their national economies. But so far, the process of integration in Central Asia has been tortuous and slow. The Central Asian region has even been described by some scholars as the region with the lowest degree of regionalization in the world. By sorting out the history of the development of ethnicity and nationalism in Central Asia, this paper analyzes the reasons hindering the development of regional integration in Central Asia from the perspective of the interaction between nationalism and regionalism. The methodological basis of the paper is a synthesis of methodological regionalism and methodological nationalism. The paper argues that ethnic problems and nationalism in Central Asia constrain the formation of the concept of regional identity. At the same time, regionalism in Central Asia has triggered concerns of Central Asian nation-states about the loss of sovereignty of some states and state nationalism. The interaction of the two factors ultimately negatively affected the development of integration in Central Asia.

**Keywords:** integration in Central Asia, ethnicity, nationalism, regionalism

## 1. Introduction

Over the course of its long history, many ethnic groups and tribes have migrated to the land of Central Asia at different times, ultimately making it a multi-ethnic region. The ethnic problems resulting from the coexistence of many ethnic groups have, in turn, influenced the historical development of the Central Asian region. The ethnic problem in Central Asia is very complex and includes tribal, ethnic, regional, religious, historical, cultural and economic factors. At the same time, it has had an enormous impact on all areas of Central Asian society. After the end of the Cold War, faced with a difficult domestic political environment and a complex international and regional situation, the newly independent Central Asian nation-states underwent a difficult political transformation internally, initiated the process of shaping nationalism, and followed the principle of balanced diplomacy in their foreign policy. And in the process of regional development, Central Asia is constantly seeking intra-regional cooperation and striving to develop regional integration. However, due to various reasons, the process of regional integration in Central Asia has always been difficult and dysfunctional. Among them, ethnicity is also an important factor in the process of regional integration in Central Asia. Therefore, this paper focuses on the interaction between nationalism and regionalism in the process of regional integration in Central Asia.

## 2. Theory and Methodology

Since the middle of the 20th century, regional integration has gone through several waves. Today, the process of regional integration covers most regions and countries of the world. In the process of regional integration, many powers that traditionally fell within the sovereignty of nation States have been transferred to supranational political entities. Therefore, it is difficult to analyze the development process of regional integration purely by using the theory of regional integration; the nation-state is the main body in regional integration, and therefore, nationalism also plays a crucial role in the development of regional integration. This paper mainly adopts the synthesis of methodological regionalism and methodological nationalism as the theoretical and methodological basis of the study.

The carrier of nationalism, "nation", is a necessary condition for the emergence of nationalism, therefore, before explaining the theory of nationalism, the concept of nation needs to be clarified first. So far, there are different views and even debates on the definition of nation in the academic world, as Walter Bagehot once said, if you never ask what is a nation, then we would think that we already know the answer. But the fact is that it is difficult to explain what a nation is and to give a simple definition [Bagehot, 1887: 20-21].

But a number of scholars and statesmen have given their own definitions of the nation. According to Joseph Stalin, The nation is a historically formed stable community of people, which emerged on the basis of the commonality of four main features, namely, the commonality of language, the commonality of territory, the commonality of economic life and the commonality of mental structure, manifested in the commonality of specific features of national culture. commonality of specific features of national culture [Stalin, 1949: 333]. This definition emphasizes more on the historical and socio-cultural attributes of the nation. However, in the process of national development and formation, the nation often also has strong political attributes, and Smith D. Anthony defines the nation as a new category of groups and identities that have emerged in the course of human social development in addition to gender space and class. As a result of the rise of nationalism, human groups were unified into new communities on a new political basis [Smith, 1992: 9]. Chinese scholar Wang Jun, on the other hand, argues that the nation is a fluid concept and believes that nations can be categorized into three different types, nation as state, nation as civic and nation as ethnic [Wang, 2008: 42].

Nationalism is first and foremost an ideological and psychological phenomenon, and Hans Kohn emphasized that nationalism should be considered first and foremost as a state of mind and an act of consciousness that has become more and more common to mankind since the French Revolution, and that demands supreme loyalty to the nation-state. [Hans, 1944: 10-11]. Whereas the terms nation and nationalism have been closely associated with the state since their inception, and it can be argued that nationalism and the state are symbiotic [Tyrrell, 1996: 233], nationalism more often than not appeals to the establishment of the nation-state. John Breuilly has argued that nationalism is a political movement that seeks and wields power in the state, and uses nationalism as an argument to justify such action. Such arguments include: the existence of a nation with a clear and distinctive character; and the supremacy of the interests and values of the nation over those of the individual. Carlton J. H. Hayes synthesized the views of various nationalists to provide a comprehensive overview of nationalism. According to him, nationalism has emerged in Europe with four broad meanings: first, nationalism as a historical process in which nationalism becomes a supporting force for the creation of a political union of nation-states; second, nationalism as a theory in which nationalism is the theory, principle, or idea offered to the actual process; third, nationalism encompasses a political action such as a particular political party's activities; and fourth, nationalism is an emotion that implies that members of a nation have loyalty to the nation-state above all others [Hayes, 1926: 6]. On the other hand, Wang Jun, the Chinese scholar mentioned above, divides nationalism into state nationalism, civic nationalism and ethno-nationalism according to his own categorization of nations [Wang, 2008: 42].

It must be emphasized, however, that with the changes in the international situation, the search for the establishment of an independent and sovereign State is no longer the sole preoccupation of nationalism, and the demands of nationalism are changing along with it. After the end of the Second World War, with the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community, the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community, regionalism began to quietly emerge. People began to think about how to deal with conflicts between nation-states through inter-state cooperation and the establishment of a supranational institution. The demands of nationalism also shifted from the struggle for sovereignty to the search for the development and prosperity of nation-states and the maintenance of regional peace [Wang, Zhu, 2019: 84].

The term regionalism was popularly used and widely discussed as a result of the initiation of European integration. Currently, there are quite a number of definitions of regionalism, with the most popular view being that regionalism is the institutional combination of individual national economies into larger economic blocs or communities [Robson, 1998: 1]. So far, regionalism has gone through two stages of development, namely old regionalism and new regionalism. In the early stage of the development of regionalism, the object of study of regionalism was also limited to the European integration process. At that time, the theoretical schools of regionalism that interpreted the European integration process included federalism, functionalism, neo-functionalism, intergovernmentalism, constructivism, and so on.

After the mid-1980s, when the Soviet Union gradually weakened and even collapsed, the former bipolar pattern was broken and economic globalization began to develop. Under the new political pattern, the development of regional integration was no longer affected by the bipolar pattern, and the relaxed international environment brought new possibilities for the development of regional organizations, which led to the development of new regionalism.

The difference between the new regionalism and the old regionalism mainly consists of the following aspects: firstly, the actors of the old regionalism are only sovereign states, emphasizing the top-down approach. The new regionalism, on the other hand, was developed from the bottom up and sees non-state actors and states as equally active in the regional and global system. Secondly, the old regionalism was protectionist and manifested itself in external alliances. The new regionalism, on the other hand, is open and compatible with an interdependent world economy. Finally, the old regionalism was primarily concerned with the economic and security spheres, with the goal of maintaining peace and economic development within the region. The new regionalism, on the other hand, is comprehensive, focusing not only on economic integration but also on the environment, democracy, social security and non-traditional security.

### **3. Ethnicity and Nationalism in Central Asia**

An analysis of today's Central Asian nationalism must begin with an understanding of the process of nation formation in its history. Historically, independent nation-states have never been formed in Central Asia. Until the 19th century, Central Asia was a highly decentralized society consisting of numerous alliances based on regional or dynastic affiliation. These alliances rose rapidly, struggled desperately for survival, shifted and often died out in competition, rivalry or subordination. The identity of the local population was a diverse blend of different identities based on religious, occupational and cultural characteristics. Ethnicity in the modern context did not exist at that time or only appeared in the name of certain local identities or political alliances [Abashin, 2007: 179].

During the reign of Tsarist Russia, the administrative division of Central Asia by the Tsarist government did not take into account its main geopolitical as well as territorial and cultural characteristics, but was crudely divided between the Turkestan border region, the Bukhara Emirate, and the Khanate of Khiva. The boundaries between Turkestan, Bukhara and Khiva did not correspond to the ethnically inhabited areas of the region, as Poslavsky Yu. I and Cherdantsev G. H. have pointed out that the Tsarist government in the past, when defining these boundaries, did not take into account the ethnicity of the inhabitants at all, and instead acted only from the point of view of political and strategic intentions, which naturally slowed down the process of the ethnic cohesion of the peoples of Central Asia [Tursunov, 1971: 20].

In order to safeguard its own interests and rule, the Tsarist government tried its best to suppress the national consciousness of Central Asia, which caused great discontent among the people of Central Asia and eventually developed into an uprising in pursuit of national independence. For example, the Andijan Uprising, which broke out in 1898, was an important event in which the Kyrgyz rebelled against the Tsarist government. Although this uprising ended in brutal suppression, it still demonstrated the Central Asian people's early pursuit of national independence and freedom. During the Tsarist period, Central Asian nationalism manifested itself as a movement for national independence.

At the end of the 19th century, with the development of capitalist relations in Turkestan, the process of the formation of modern nations began among the Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik and other peoples. However, the process of convergence of the peoples of Central Asia was not completed until the outbreak of the October Revolution in 1917. The majority of the Central Asian population still called themselves by their clan and tribal names. At the same time, a powerful Jadid social movement began in Central Asia, which included elements of both Muslim integration programs and pan-Turkic nationalism [Abashin, 2007: 179]. At that time Central Asian nationalism was expressed in the form of pan-Turkic nationalism and pan-Islamism, with pan-Turkism being the dominant ideology, and its political demand was the creation of an independent and unified Turkestan state. Although the plans of the Central Asian social elites for the creation of an independent Turkestan did not materialize at that time, the ideas of pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism still have a profound influence on the political and social life of Central Asia today.

During the Soviet period, in order to suppress pan-Turkist ideology and prevent the rich region of Central Asia from becoming an independent state entity and thus seceding from the Soviet Union, Stalin's policy of state demarcation, initiated in 1924, drew "artificial borders" between the Central Asian Soviet Republics [Esengul, 2013: 240], and eventually Five socialist national republics were formed: the Uzbek SSR, the Turkmen SSR, the Tajik SSR, the Kyrgyz SSR, and the Kazakh SSR. The Soviet Government's State-building program did not take into account the historical traditions of Central Asia and did not correspond to the historical development of Central Asia, and even the leaders of the USSR, who were the leading nation-State builders at the time, were not aware of the distinctions between the peoples of Central Asia.

In the writings of Abashin S., a scene is described in which, in December 1955, when a Soviet delegation was returning from a visit to India and landed in Tashkent, Khrushchev S. N. made a speech in which he said, "You Tajiks are very good, you work well, you have a high yield of cotton! But not enough with your neighbors, the

Uzbeks, who have people in their leadership who are anti-mechanization ..." [Abashin, 2007: 177-178] From this it can be seen that the USSR artificially divided the Central Asian nation-states with the aim of dividing potentially hostile forces. "In this sense it can rightly be said that 'nationalism' in Central Asia and the Caucasus was a product of the Soviet Union" [Kaiser, 1992: 284], or, "the national consciousness of the peoples was largely a product of the Soviet Union in 1924 - designed to polarize, to secure Soviet control" [Jukes, 1981: 259-260].

Moreover, the division of ethnic groups in the Soviet Union did not follow Stalin's own definition of ethnicity (see above), but was a political choice. For example, in order to ensure that the Uzbeks would be the dominant ethnic group in the nation-State to be created, the name "Sart" was changed to "Uzbek".

Nevertheless, the delimitation of Central Asian nation-states by the Soviet Union led to the temporary stabilization of the region and accelerated the process of ethnic cohesion in the region. Due to the strong role of the dominant political culture and its greater inclusiveness, for a considerable period of time the Central Asian peoples saw themselves as Soviet citizens. Thus, the nationalism of the Central Asian peoples at that time belonged to the category of civic nationalism and was motivated by identification with the strong Soviet Union.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian political elites and populations that became independent and sovereign nation-states began the difficult process of constructing their national identities and searching for them. In the early 1990s, Turkey took the lead in bringing the two sides closer together by taking advantage of the Turkic-language ethnic and cultural identity it shared with Central Asian nation-states and the social values of the secularized Muslim states to establish Turkey was the first to establish its influence in Central Asia by bringing the two sides closer together and establishing its own influence in the region. It is worth noting, however, that the pan-Turkism advanced by Turkey was an important but not a decisive factor in influencing the newly independent states of Central Asia [Shumilov M. M., 2022: 48]. After that, its influence in Central Asia waned.

After that, the political elites of the Central Asian nation-states consciously began the process of national nationalism construction. In this process, the Central Asian states demonstrated a strong sense of subject nationhood and national self-centeredness. The Central Asian states that gained independence, promoted by the political elites, emphasized their sovereignty and national individuality, and introduced corresponding legal measures to ensure the priority of the subject nation. Along with the sense of national self-centeredness, large nationalism also induced ethnic conflicts within the countries.

In addition, the mines planted by the artificial division of nationalities and the establishment of nation-states during the Soviet period also erupted at this time. The frequent occurrence of territorial, water resource and cross-border ethnic problems among the Central Asian States has affected the stability and development of the region.

#### **4. The Impact of Central Asian Nationalism on Regionalism**

The main manifestation of regionalism is regional cooperation, and the nation-state is the subject of regional cooperation and regional integration. The essence of regional cooperation is that nation-states engage in statecraft in order to maximize their own interests at the regional level. Therefore, as the driving force and the core of the establishment of nation-states, nationalism is a key factor constraining the development of regionalism. The main influence of nationalism on regionalism lies in its degree of identification with the concept of regional cooperation.

As mentioned above, nationalism is a complex political ideology that, at its core, emphasizes the importance of national identity. At different stages of history, nationalism takes on different forms, generates different national identities and expresses different nationalist aspirations, and this is true for Central Asia as well. After the national independence movement that developed in the Russian Empire, the civic nationalism of the Soviet period, and the pan-Turkism rooted in the common Turkic peoples, the construction of national nationalism led by the political elites of the independent Central Asian nation-states has not yet been completed. The impact of Central Asian nationalism on the concept of regional identity can be analyzed from the perspectives of state institutions, elements of the national community and interstate relations, respectively.

The impact of politically oriented state nationalism on the development of regionalism depends to a large extent on the attitude of political elites towards it. At the level of national political systems, in the post-Soviet period, the question of how to move away from the heavy Soviet legacy and from socialism and planned economies to the construction of nation-states and market economies became a common problem for Central Asian leaders. In terms of the choice of political system, almost all Central Asian countries have opted for a formal "multi-party" political system and "separation of powers", but in practice a highly centralized presidential system has emerged. In addition, the power structure of the Central Asian States is characterized by a strong culture of family politics and the division of interest groups. As a result, the nature of the Central Asian States has been the subject of much debate. Some refer to them as "hybrid regimes", while others define them as strongly authoritarian regimes [Esengul, 2013:

240].

In the process of regional integration, nation States cede a part of their sovereignty to supranational institutions. But in the special political system of Central Asia, its leaders are not happy to share their power with the region. "the Central Asian governments' neo-patrimonial nature does not allow for an integrated economic, political, and security Since leaders worry that pooling sovereignty and diminishing the significance of borders to facilitate flows of goods and people might have a detrimental impact, the Central Asian governments' neo-patrimonial nature does not allow for an integrated economic, political, and security system at the regional level. Since leaders worry that pooling sovereignty and diminishing the significance of borders to facilitate flows of goods and people might have a detrimental impact on their control of strategic economic resources, incentives for deep cooperation to create a regional area of free (or even less controlled) movement are out of the question" [Buraneli, 2021: 4].

Thus, authoritarian regimes in the Central Asian states have largely constrained the formation of regional identity concepts and hindered the development of regionalism. This phenomenon can also be explained by an intergovernmentalist perspective. Intergovernmentalists argue that the state always tries to maintain control over the decision-making process in matters of vital interest [Litvinova, 2020: 35].

Common language, religion and culture are several elements of the ethnic community. Of these, language occupies a central place among the national elements. During the Soviet period, due to the centrality of Soviet Russia within the USSR, Russian was made the official language of the USSR. The language of Central Asia was dominated by Russian, and the Cyrillic alphabet was introduced to Cyrillize the national script. After the collapse of the USSR, in order to emphasize the uniqueness of their peoples and maintain the stability of their nation-states, the Central Asian countries, in the process of constructing their nation-states, actively propagated the languages<sup>1</sup> and cultures of their subject peoples and began the process of de-Russianization. In Kazakhstan, for example, the documents of the twelfth session of the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan state that "the Kazakh language is one of the symbols of the State, together with the State emblem, the flag and the national anthem. The development of the Kazakh language is one of the priority directions of State cultural and educational policy."<sup>2</sup>

This ethno-linguistic and cultural policy of the Central Asian nation-states has led to increasing linguistic and cultural differences between the Central Asian countries. In this context, Martha Brill O. has written: "With every passing year the Central Asian states are becoming more distinct from one another. Travelling in the region one now gets a strong sense of moving from country to country. Signs are in different languages and even different alphabets. Skylines in major cities are being transformed in very different ways, and the same old Soviet constructions no longer dominate. Some of these countries are beginning to be part of a global economy while others remain almost as isolated as they were in the Soviet era." [Martha, 2004: 24]

Language and cultural differences have raised the barriers to mutual understanding among populations in neighboring countries. Interviews have been conducted with Central Asian residents, and when asked what comes to mind first when thinking of other Central Asian countries, many of them find themselves unable to fully answer [Woods E., Baker T, 2022]:

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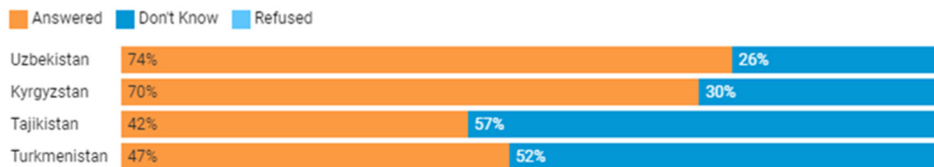
<sup>1</sup> In four of the five nation-states of Central Asia, except for Kyrgyzstan, the language of the dominant nation was established as the official language, and Russian was used only as a language of civil communication. In July 2023, Kyrgyzstan introduced a new Law on the State Language of Kyrgyzstan, which makes Kyrgyz the state language and Russian the official language. The new language law defines which Kyrgyz must master the Kyrgyz language and in which contexts it must be used. For more information, refer to: CONSTITUTIONAL LAW OF THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC dated July 17, 2023 No. 140// About the State Language of the Kyrgyz Republic. URL: <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/112618> accessed: 03.11.2023. (in Russ.).

<sup>2</sup> Rahim A. Where does the Motherland begin? URL: [https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc\\_id=30074854&pos=4;-103#pos=4;-103](https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30074854&pos=4;-103#pos=4;-103) accessed: 03.11.2023. (in Russ.).

### What is the first thing that comes to mind when these Central Asian countries are mentioned? - Uzbekistan



### What is the first thing that comes to mind when these Central Asian countries are mentioned? - Kazakhstan



Source of the images: article *A More Integrated Future? Mapping Central Asian Optimism*.

<https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/a-more-integrated-future-mapping-central-asian-optimism/>

Cultural convergence is an important factor in the construction of regional identity, and as the national cultures of the Central Asian countries continue to strengthen and the policy of de-Russianization is gradually being promoted, the linguistic and cultural differences between the neighbouring countries of Central Asia are growing. Such differences have to a large extent hindered the formation of the concept of regional identity in the Central Asian subregion.

In addition to language and culture, religion is an important force that unites regions and peoples. Islam is the dominant religion in Central Asia. According to statistics, the Muslim population accounts for 81% of the total population of Central Asia [Rowland, 1990], with 87.9% of the Muslim population in Uzbekistan, 70.2% in Kazakhstan, 90% in Kyrgyzstan, 96.99% in Tajikistan, and 93.02% in Turkmenistan<sup>3</sup>. During the history of the Soviet Union, Islam, like other religions, was subject to strong political repression [Xu, 2015: 268]. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, due to changes in the geopolitical environment, Islamic extremist forces in Central Asia expanded rapidly and became a significant political force in Central Asian societies, attempting to take advantage of the unfavorable socio-economic situation and seize power amidst a wave of popular discontent [Barov, Medvedev, 2021: 89]. In order to maintain the security of the state and the stability of the regime, the leaders of Central Asia began to strongly suppress extremist religious organizations. The suppression of Islamic movements in these countries hindered the contribution of this factor to regional integration [Ateed, Özel Özcan, 2023: 142].

Although a regional identity derived from religious factors has not emerged in Central Asia. However, the consensus among Central Asian national elites to combat extremist religiosity and maintain national stability has facilitated progress in security integration in Central Asia. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is the most successful example. Although the predecessor of the SCO, the Shanghai Five Consultative Mechanism, was initially established to resolve border issues left over from the Sino-Soviet period, by the time the SCO was formally established, the issues of combating ethnic separatism, extremist religiosity, international terrorism, and transnational crime had become an important topic of this security integration mechanism.

Relations among the Central Asian States are not ironclad, and such issues as territorial disputes, water resources, transboundary peoples, energy and transportation still affect the harmony of the Central Asian States. On the issues of water resources and energy, “the region obtains 90 percent of its water supply from two rivers (the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya), but there are conflicts between the upstream countries (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) with abundant water and the downstream countries (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan) with abundant oil and gas resources [Lee, Asiryani, Butler, 2020].”

Territorial disputes are one of the political legacies of the Soviet Union. In the case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,

<sup>3</sup> Muslim Population by Country 2023. URL: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/muslim-population-by-country> accessed: 05.11.2023.

for example, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, only 519 kilometers of the total 971-kilometer border between the two countries were delimited and demarcated, with the remainder of the border remaining in dispute. There are about 70 unresolved conflict areas between the two countries, particularly in the Batken (Kyrgyzstan) and Isfara regions, including the Vorukh (Tajikistan) enclave. Conflicts occur annually along the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, totaling more than 150 clashes over the past decade, with casualties on both sides [Nadyrbek 2021].

The problem of cross-border ethnicity was a concomitant of the artificial demarcation of borders by the Soviet Union. Cross-border ethnic problems are widespread in Central Asia. The main ethnic groups of one country often exist as minorities in another country. Consequently, when ethnic conflicts arise in one country, they are often accompanied by mutual solidarity among cross-border ethnic groups in neighboring countries, which in turn can lead to further developments and even affect inter-State relations. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, there have been a number of clashes between ethnic Uzbeks and the dominant ethnic group, and Uzbekistan has also been involved in political events and ethnic conflicts in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Historically, the peoples of Central Asia shared similar cultural, religious and national memories, which should have been an important factor in promoting regional identity in Central Asia. However, the special process of shaping the Central Asian states by the Soviet Union led to contradictions among them, and the authoritarian regimes established in the Central Asian states after the disintegration and the reinforcement of their national identities drove them further and further away from each other. In general, state nationalism in Central Asia has not been able to contribute effectively to the formation of a regional identity, thus largely constraining the integration process in Central Asia.

### **5. Regional Integration Organizations in Central Asia and Their Characteristics**

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought an all-round shock to the Central Asian countries. In order to maintain the security and stability of the nation-states and to get rid of serious economic difficulties, the independent Central Asian countries began to actively seek external cooperation, and also actively promoted the development of regional integration. In 1994, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan signed a treaty to establish the Central Asian Economic Union (CEAU). In 1996, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan signed an agreement to establish a four-country customs union. The Customs Union was reorganized into the Eurasian Economic Community in 2000, and in 2003, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine signed an agreement on the construction of a unified economic space in Yalta. The Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union was signed by the Presidents of the member states of the Customs Union and the Unified Economic Space at a meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council on 29 May. The agreement marked the transition of the Eurasian economic project to a new, deeper level of integration. On January 1, 2015, the Treaty entered into force.<sup>4</sup> By now, the Eurasian Economic Union is the most effective regional economic integration organization in the Central Asian region.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is another important regional organization in Central Asia. The organization originated from the Shanghai Five meeting mechanism established in 1996 and was founded in 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The SCO has played an important role in maintaining stability and development in Central Asia.

In addition to the above two organizations, the Central Asian countries also participate in the Collective Security Organization (CSO) initiated by Russia, the Partnership for Peace (PfP) initiated by the United States, and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) initiated by Turkey, among other regional integration organizations.

Looking at the organizations of Central Asian integration, it is not difficult to see several characteristics of the integration process in Central Asia: 1) the lack of intra-regional powers to lead the integration process. The five Central Asian countries are all small countries with limited capacity of their own, and can only follow the strategic development of the regional hegemonic countries. 2) Lack of collective identity. The Central Asian countries have different views of regional identity. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan joined the Eurasian Economic Union and consider themselves Eurasian countries. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, on the other hand, prefer to identify themselves with their Asian identity and Islamic character. 3) Regional hegemony is an obstacle to Central Asian integration. The big powers play a dominant and decisive role in regional integration organizations, and the Central Asian countries have no choice but to follow the decisions of the big powers in the integration organizations. And these decisions are not fully in line with the interests of Central Asian countries, which leads to their resistance to integration. 4)

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<sup>4</sup> The above information was obtained from the official website of the Eurasian Economic Union. URL: <http://www.eaeunion.org/> accessed: 12.11.2023.

Overlapping regional integration mechanisms. The Central Asian countries are involved in a large number of integration organizations, which overlap in function, but rather hinder the implementation and development of specific projects in regional integration.

## **6. The Impact of Regionalism on Nationalism in Central Asia**

Regionalism emphasizes regional cooperation. In the process of regional cooperation, in order to achieve common interests, regional states work together to formulate certain goals and plans, and regional supranational organizations are the entities that achieve these goals and plans. This requires nation-states to cede part of their sovereignty to regional organizations. In a way, regionalism requires unconditional identification with supranational organizations, which has a certain negative impact on national identity in Central Asia.

Nationalism tends to be centered on the nation-state and is guided by the pursuit of the common interests of the nation. Therefore, when confronted with regional cooperation, nationalism requires that before participating in the regionalization process, nation-states first make a comprehensive consideration of the risks associated with participation in the regionalization process, the ideological basis of regional cooperation, and the magnitude of the benefits to be derived from the cooperation. After ceding part of their sovereignty to regional supranational organizations, regional supranational organizations act first and foremost in the interests of the region, not necessarily in the interests of every nation-state. Taking the example of European integration, in recent years some anti-integration voices have appeared within the EU due to disputes over a number of issues of interest. In 2016, out of the desire for autonomy in directing the flow of funds to certain sectors of the economy, regulating fishing in British territorial waters, controlling migration, defining diplomatic strategy and changing the orientation of foreign policy, etc. [Selezneva, Murataliev, Valeeva-Khakimov, 2023: 175], the UK passed a referendum to officially leave the EU.

In this context, regional cooperation is not based exclusively on a nationalist perspective, and even produces cooperation that does not meet nationalist aspirations. This sovereignty, therefore, raises the concern of the Central Asian nation-states as to whether the supranational institutions resulting from the overdevelopment of regionalism will weaken or even dissolve nationalism and deconstruct the sovereignty of the nation-states. The biggest problem facing Central Asian regional integration organizations at the present time is also the skepticism towards regionalism within the Central Asian States and peoples. Uzbekistan, for example, which might have assumed the role of regional leader, became an internally focused autarkic state, reluctant to become involved in regional initiatives that might challenge its policies of hard borders and ultrasovereignty. Turkmenistan followed an even more extreme course of self-isolation under the rhetorical protection of a policy of neutrality. Both states pursued active policies of exclusionary nation building, focusing on Uzbek and Turkmen identity to the detriment of any supranational loyalties [Lewis 2018: 9]. This negative attitude of the Central Asian countries towards regionalism may also explain the current tortuous and repetitive development of regional integration processes in Central Asia.

## **7. Conclusion**

Nationalism and regionalism are still at a mutually exclusive stage in the integration process in Central Asia. Both nationalism and regionalism emphasize collective identity. Nationalism's identity is with the nation and the nation-state, emphasizing absolute loyalty to the nation-state. Regionalism, on the other hand, calls for a decrease in the people's loyalty and expectations to the nation-state and an increase in their loyalty and expectations to supranational institutions. Authoritarian regimes in Central Asian countries are accustomed to closed and protective policies to safeguard the interests of the regime and are not pleased with the allegiance of citizens to external supranational organizations. Common culture is an important factor in shaping regional identity. The process of constructing nation-states in post-independence Central Asia has led to growing linguistic and cultural differences in the region, which have hindered the development of the concept of regional identity. Nationalism in Central Asia is rooted in the region's long and complex history. Both the colonial rule of Tsarist Russia, the artificial shaping of Central Asian nation-states by the Soviet Union, and the difficult construction of post-independence nation-states have had a tremendous impact on Central Asian nationalism and have resulted in complex inter- and intra-state ethnic problems in Central Asia. Such ethnic problems as territorial disputes, water resources, cross-border nationalities, energy, transportation and tribal conflicts have deeply affected the unity and stability of the inter-State and intra-State regions of Central Asia, making the development of integration and regionalism in Central Asia slow and tortuous.

Many regional integration organizations with overlapping functions exist in Central Asia. To a certain extent, these organizations contribute to security, stability and economic development in Central Asia. However, the similarity of their functions and their hegemonic dominance have limited the depth and breadth of Central Asian countries' participation in these integrations. So far, Central Asia lacks a regional integration project that is led and jointly



participated in by Central Asian countries. But in recent years, Central Asian political elites seem to have realized the importance of regional cooperation. Since coming to power in 2016, Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has embarked on reforms to open up and prioritize the upgrading of the level of economic cooperation among Central Asian countries, and in 2017 he initiated the holding of a consultative meeting of Central Asian heads of state. Since the first meeting was held in 2018 in Kazakhstan's capital Astana, the conference has been successfully held five times. By the fifth conference in 2023, intraregional trade in Central Asia had increased by more than 80 percent, and the countries share an interest in continuing to deepen cooperation in the economic, scientific, security and other fields.

It is noteworthy that Turkmenistan is also actively involved in this mechanism of regional dialogue and cooperation.<sup>5</sup> The very fact that they revitalized the regional meetings of presidents in 2018, after a break lasting a decade, reflects at least two things: 1) that they recognize the value and reality of the region as a common home that needs repairing; and 2) that they are ready to proceed towards closer region-wide cooperation. In the future, this platform for dialogue may play a positive role for regional integration in Central Asia.

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<sup>5</sup> In 1992, the then President of Turkmenistan, Saparmyrat Nyazov, put forward the principle of "political neutrality and economic openness" at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and in 1993 declared Turkmenistan's neutrality policy within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); at the United Nations General Assembly in December 1995, a resolution was unanimously adopted granting Turkmenistan the status of permanent neutral state. In December 1995, the General Assembly of the United Nations unanimously adopted a resolution granting Turkmenistan the status of a permanently neutral state, making it the only permanently neutral state in Asia and the third in the world. In order to preserve its status as a permanently neutral State, Turkmenistan seldom participates in regional and international affairs.

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