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Eurasian Economic Union integration in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the political and social discourses towards Eurasian integration in Central Asia. I concentrate on the independent non-Russian political elites and wider popular responses to the integration in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and on the motivations leading these decision makers and societies to Eurasian economic integration. The focus is on Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the only Central Asian countries in the Eurasian Economic Union, and on their respective populations. I demonstrate how post-Soviet Kazakhstani and Kyrgyz regimes facilitated ideas and ideals of Eurasianism so closely connected to their own interests in economic and socio-political contexts. The article also aims to reveal the complex web of interests, identities and mobilities of groups and individuals behind the political façade of integration talks in Central Eurasia. In doing so the study focuses on the historical approach and political elite-led discourses combined with the sociological data of social responses to the integration projects at different stages of their development.

KEYWORDS

Eurasia; Eurasian Economic Union; political elites; integration; migration

Introduction

This article analyses political and social discourses towards Eurasian integration in Central Asia. I focus on the independent non-Russian political elites and wider popular responses to the integration in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and on the motivations leading these decision makers and societies to further Eurasian economic integration. Elites are defined here mainly in terms of the political elites comprising the ruling regimes of President Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan and President Atambayev in Kyrgyzstan. These elites are 'made up of autonomous social and political actors who are interested primarily in maintaining and enhancing their power, so that their power struggles are not reducible to classes or other collectivities'.¹ In both regimes we can define a merger of those elites possessing the political and economic capital. Powerful political elites in Kazakhstan are comprised of mainly remaining Communist-era elites and post-Soviet technocrats. In Kyrgyzstan, the only Central Asian state with a relative regime transition, 'old' regional elites nevertheless remain in control of the power field although due to several attempts to change the regime (including revolution), the central elite had gradually repositioned itself. In both cases the political elites merged with the economic elites in formal networks

of ruling political parties (Isaacs, 2011) and informal networks, described in some literature as clans (Collins, 2006; Kudaibergenova, 2015; Schatz, 2004).

The merging of capital and political power in post-communist regimes was facilitated by the privatization of public assets and 'the ability of the Communist-era elites to seize assets' (Walder, 2003, p. 900). The intra-elite regime durability in these states was also defined by the ability of the central power elites to distribute assets to the regional elites (Cummings, 2006; McGlinchey, 2003) but also by an attempt to control them through various economic programmes introduced by the centre (Kudaibergenova, 2015); and to legitimize the regime to the wider population by the provision of stability, economic growth and public goods (Brusis, 2016; Matveeva, 2009). Thus the economy, not politics, became the prime focus for the incumbent political elites' legitimation in Central Asia. Whether the country depended on external aid as in the case of Kyrgyzstan (McGlinchey, 2003) or on attracting foreign investment that turned into a political programme in the case of Kazakhstan (Jandossov, 1998; Marat, 2009), these regimes depended on providing stability and growth for the intra-elite groups as well as the wider populations.

The regional integration in which both Kazakhstani and Kyrgyz regimes actively participated since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 represents a particular puzzle. On the one hand, both countries highly value their independence from other states, particularly their independence from the Soviet, or Russian, centre. The discourse of independence and nationalism is especially on the increase at the moment in the light of the rising concerns of the Eurasian sceptics which mainly comes from the ethno-nationalists side. On the other hand, both countries demonstrate an on-going interest in actively participating, or in the case of Kazakhstan, even leading such regional integrationist projects as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). What is at stake here is not only an economic prerogative² but also, in the words of the countries' presidents themselves, the creation of a common socio-cultural³ and possibly political space. One of the pressing examples of such a trend is the reflection of the Russian political discourses on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) rights almost identically reflected in the Kyrgyz discussions on the 'gay propaganda' in March 2014.⁴

How and why do these Central Asian regimes prefer to engage with the Eurasian integration discourse? What kinds of problems and challenges but also alternative identities do these discourses possess?

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were chosen for the present analysis because they are the only Central Asian member states of the EEU. Among the other regional countries, only Tajikistan remains interested in the future in joining talks on membership of the EEU. Turkmenistan continues its successful policy of neutrality in foreign and domestic affairs and the country does not plan to join the EEU in the near future, instead it prefers to successfully engage in bilateral relations with a number of countries.

Uzbekistan, after Kazakhstan the second largest economy in the region, continuously applies its 'self-reliance policy' defined by the aims of 'pursuing economic growth via mercantilism and promoting the manufacturing sector, reaching self-sufficiency; securing control and stability' in its economic policies (Teles Fazendeiro, 2015, p. 487) and, thus, abstains from joining the EEU.⁵ Uzbekistan's President Karimov voiced his opinion clearly stating the country's dissatisfaction with its Soviet historical experience and the

possibility of any repetition in another form of unionism. In his 2014 address to the nation (dedicated to its 23 years of independence) in Tashkent, Karimov said that:

During the former totalitarian [Soviet] regime no one in the world knew about Uzbekistan's existence – of such a great country, of such a nation as noble Uzbek people? Who accepted us as an independent state? Who knew that our land is a land of great and unique treasures, the homeland for the greatest scientists and thinkers, and that we are the successors of this priceless heritage and descendants of these notable personalities?⁶

While the President addressed the rich history and heritage of Uzbekistan, he also mentioned the unlawful position of the Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan that 'as part of the former USSR' became a 'backward, agrarian republic with a narrow, hypertrophied raw resources economy, with a devastating monopoly of cotton production that [was] destroying' the Uzbek Soviet economy.⁷ Karimov does not make direct comparisons between the Soviet and 'Eurasian' Unions but he clearly states that he is against the 'old system' of domination 'from the centre' – a commonly used political discourse of the Soviet and partly Russian domination (especially in Baltic political discourses).

So Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan remain the only Central Asian countries in the EEU. However, their paths to integration differed – Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev was the greatest proponent of the EEU since the early 1990s while Kyrgyzstan's changing political regimes and elites are considered to have been 'pushed' into the EEU as Russia is believed to continue to 'leverage' into Kyrgyz politics. Kyrgyzstan first announced its intention to join in 2011. 'This was followed by attempts to secure concessions and financial compensation to offset the expected costs of membership and the requirement to align local legislation to the Custom Union regulations, adjusting tariffs accordingly' when Kyrgyzstan officially joined the Union in 2015 (Fumangalli, 2014, p. 3).

Experts had argued that Kyrgyzstan's aims in joining the EEU depended on 'traditional cross-border and domestic trade of services and goods, the development of its industries and local businesses' (Mello, 2015, p. 6) as well as security, and migration flows where Russia and Kazakhstan are the prime receivers of Kyrgyz labour migrants (Abashin, 2013; Gorenburg, 2014; Isabayeva, 2011; Laruelle, 2007, 2008b; Reeves, 2012, 2013). The positions of these two countries in the EEU have been discussed and long debated in their respective societies especially in terms of possible economic harm, and foreign policy alternatives such as growing economic integration with China.

Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev was the most active proponent of Eurasian integration after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He saw the importance in re-establishing trade routes and building a common economic zone with the republics of the former Soviet Union. Finally, Nazarbayev's 'vision is driven by innovation and technology and is set apart from its Russian counterpart by stressing the importance of Central Asia's will and desire to be part of, or indeed to lead, such a project' (Kalra & Saxena, 2015, p. 41). Kazakhstan's leadership roles in the EEU had been long pronounced in the political discourse of the regime both domestically and abroad (Ancheschi, 2014; Cummings, 2003; Hale, 2009). Domestically President Nazarbayev is seen as the vanguard of Eurasian integration.

The study of these two different paths to integration can reveal a set of motivations (economic cooperation, capital interests, legitimation and alternative identities) as well as gradual appropriation of these integrationist discourses by the wider public. These

findings also might highlight future scenarios for states such as Tajikistan and may reveal how, in the case of Kazakhstan, a persistent elite-led political discourse on integration can shape domestic and foreign policy over two decades of independence. Kazakhstan's Eurasianist path, however, is still ambiguous in terms of addressing the country's identity politics, especially towards its significant Russophone and ethnic Russian population.⁸

The article's main goal is to demonstrate how post-Soviet Kazakhstani and Kyrgyz regimes facilitated the ideas and ideals of Eurasianism as closely connected to their own interests in economic and also socio-political contexts. I focus on unveiling the complex web of interests, identities and mobilities of groups and individuals behind the political façade of integration talks in these two countries. In doing so the study concentrates on the historical approach and political elite-led discourses combined with the sociological data of social response to the integration projects at different stages of their development.

Integration and Eurasian discourses in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Integration has been a buzzword in Central Asia since the mid-1990s. Most Central Asian leaders agreed that regional integration and stability was a key priority in establishing a stable future for their respective countries. The initial opinion polls also demonstrated that the local populations approved regional integration, especially in the aftermath of independence. However, after numerous treaties, promises, informal agreements and new organizations such as the Central Asian Cooperation Association (CACO), little integration was actually happening on the ground (see Allison, 2008; Bohr, 2004).

The failures of Central Asian regional integration are partially explained by the 'local preoccupation with sovereignty' and 'a possible relationship between the virtual quality of regionalism and the political fabric of Central Asia – the flows of power and the ways in which leaders seek effective control over the distribution of material and political resources' (Allison, 2008, p. 188). How and why, then, did Eurasian integration remain on the agenda for regional development? The multiple visions of Eurasianism range from purely economic union to a boundless yet ambiguous political and cultural space of ever blooming regional prosperity and geopolitical importance. But if the Kazakh and Kyrgyz leaders are so occupied with their sovereignty what can explain their regimes' willingness to integrate within the EEU which Russia openly dominates?

Published research considers these trends mostly from the Russian perspective (Cooley & Laruelle, 2013; Izvestiya, 2011; Laruelle, 2008a; Shlapentokh, 2007; Tsygankov, 2003). After all, the original Eurasianism was an invention of Russian intellectual thought (Laruelle, 2008a; Gerasimov, Glebov, & Mogiler, 2013) but was also widely supported by Central Asian intellectuals like Olzhas Suleimenov and Chingiz Aitmatov (Ram, 2001). Non-Russian Eurasianism occupies a rather small niche in scholarly discussions and considers the development of Eurasianism as a state identity in Kazakhstan (Abzhaparova, 2014; Izvestiya, 2009), as a need for Central Asian regimes' internal and external security, economic gain and political legitimacy (Allison, 2008 on 'virtual regionalism'; Cummings, 2003; Hale, 2009 on 'unionist nationalism'; Koch, 2013) or as President Nazarbayev's geopolitical contribution to the post-Soviet development (Nysanbayev, 2010). The study of Eurasian discourses outside Russia and especially in countries that were interested in

participating in this Union is crucial for the understanding of how the discourses about the EEU were developed outside Russia itself.

The borderless mobility of capital flows, labour forces, identities, languages and cultures – these are the major goals and attractions for the Central Asian political elites and societies in the Eurasian integration project. Several group interests are important in this discussion – the political elites seeking legitimation and economic growth in the longer run, Russian-speaking minorities residing in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as well as local residents who work in or often travel to Russia. The political elites pursue interests related to the state capacity and partly legitimation of their regimes. Some parts of the financial elites merged into the political apparatus also seek their capital interests and investments in Russia.⁹ In Kazakhstan the economic possibilities and challenges of integration (mainly competition from the larger Russian market) are seen most ambiguously. Small and mid-range businesses have expressed their dissatisfaction since Kazakhstan joined the Customs Union in 2010.¹⁰ Only in Kazakhstan has the political discourse on Eurasianism developed steadily. The main groups interested in an alternative regional identity are the so-called Russian-speaking minorities but the destiny of a common Eurasian identity is still unclear.

Many experts also fear that the economies of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan will not gain much from the Union nor become economically competitive. Dosym Satpayev, an authoritative local expert shared an opinion that ‘if the state has complex internal economic and political problems which impede it from becoming competitive in the global economy, no Union will make it possible for such a state [to develop]’.¹¹ He also mentioned that Kyrgyzstan’s WTO membership ‘did not make the country more competitive’. Besides, Kazakhstan does not export many manufactured goods, argue experts. The biggest shares of Kazakhstan’s exports to the Customs Union countries belong to mineral products (58%), metals (28%) and chemical products (9%).¹² The shadow of the Ukrainian crisis continues to worry Kazakh politicians as well.

Kyrgyzstan’s position to integration is predominantly economy-driven but also depends on the country’s vast migrant flows to Russia (92% of all labour migration from Kyrgyzstan). Through Eurasian integration Kyrgyzstan seeks to expand its markets for exported goods and create more jobs for its population both external and within the country. Kyrgyzstan’s biggest export destinations are Russia and Kazakhstan and thus opening borders with these states promised Kyrgyzstan more opportunities to increase commodity turnover. Although Kyrgyzstan joined the EEU only recently, similar concerns exist in the country – competition from Russian markets, and retaining border control with Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan

As already mentioned, Kazakhstan’s President Nazarbayev has taken a very active role in the Soviet integration processes since 1990 which then changed into a separate Eurasianist discourse of domestic and foreign policy. This discourse was continuous and consistent throughout the country’s independence period. Many scholars share the opinion that this Kazakh Eurasian discourse originated in Nazarbayev’s ‘Eurasian Speech’ (Nazarbayev, 2010). On 29 March 1994, President Nazarbayev gave a speech at Moscow State University where he stated that:

It is impossible not to notice anxiety of people who now remained outside the borders of all the fifteen republics that constituted one country. These are ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Kazakhs and members of our peoples.

This is explained by the rapid dismantling of the USSR and the period of euphoria over independence, but also by the following period of collective responsibility for survival in new economic and geopolitical conditions which many countries realised. The dismantling of the common rouble zone deepened our concerns, for example. You know that I always supported integration [among post-Soviet states], first of all, because of the personal relations we have [*chelovecheskie svyazi*]. [...] We, the republics of the former Soviet Union are prepared for common union preconditioned by our history and destiny. We share the same forms and mechanisms of connections and management, common mentality and many more other similarities.¹³

Initially Nazarbayev pushed for the re-establishment of links and networks for the country's exports via Russia. This goal along with establishing economic stability and regime stability in the turbulent 1990s era was crucial for the regime's longevity. The cultural and common Eurasian path rhetoric was added to the regime's Eurasian discourse only in the 2000s. It began with the domestic promotion of the former EurAsEc organization and Kazakhstan's aspirations for regional leadership. Finally, the Eurasianist cultural approach was an attempt to introduce an alternative identity for the country's substantial Russophone and ethnic Russian population. The regime's numerous attempts to establish a multi-polar national identity, however, is a project still in the making. The Eurasian identity is also a process in formation although the roots of such Eurasianism were expressed long before the collapse of the Soviet Union – already in 1975 the Kazakh Russophone writer Olzhas Suleimenov envisioned such a future (Ram, 2001).

By the mid-1990s, the political elites in Kazakhstan were acutely aware of the major failure in constructing the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – a cooperation project in which President Nazarbayev took an active role. The forceful exit from the rouble zone by late 1993 and the challenges of the immediate economic crisis influenced the motives and rhetoric of Nazarbayev's 'Eurasian speech'. Domestically Nazarbayev continued building a discourse of development and stability (see Kudaibergenova, 2015) combined with aspirations for regional integration which was only achieved in the late 2000s. Economic and social stability in times of crisis and heightened political competition (throughout the mid and late 1990s) was crucial for the Kazakhstani regime. So the insecurity shared by President Nazarbayev in numerous interviews was a clear signal for finding a viable political discourse to foresee these challenges domestically. These discourses and speeches, however, were not as successful abroad:

After the past August events the situation in the USSR has completely changed and a lot of things are now seen from a different angle. This includes the future of the Union. I see it as the union of sovereign states united by the need to solve similar economic, political and social problems. It is possible that this union will be the union of the Eurasian states. Each republic will decide its joining form and participation in such union independently, on their own.¹⁴

In 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, President Nazarbayev expressed his own independent views on how a future confederation of the Eurasians states should be formed. In the context of the total collapse of the previous economic links between the former Soviet republics, he stressed the importance of the unification of sovereign states by highlighting the 'common challenges' of transition and dependency on the

existing networks of supply and production. It is important to stress that Nazarbayev and his court of political elites already expressed these ideas of a confederation or union of sovereign states all acting independently and on equal rights in 1990, prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the wake of this collapse, these projects and ideas were formalized into a confederation of sovereign states where the membership and decisions about such cooperation had to be decided independently by each state. In other words, each state had to operate on equal grounds instead of being dominated by one or two states – the legacy of the Soviet Union too influenced Kazakhstan’s political field and both cultural and political elites among the titular Kazakhs expressed their ideas of decolonization from the Soviet Union (Kudaibergenova, 2016).

In one of his early 1990s interviews, Marat Tazhin, one of the regime’s main ideologues stated that:

All of the Soviet countries inherited a more or less similar Soviet heritage: economic crisis exacerbated by the break up of the inter-republican links [...], economic incompetency of the production (apart from raw resources) on the global market, building the new legitimacy, problems of numerous national minorities, borders, creation of states that would be able to perform all the functions of the central element of the political system, some similar features of the political cultures.

All of these conditions insist on and dictate the importance of creating a union, at least an economic one, that would include most of the former Soviet republics. But CIS which was able to unite almost all former republics and sign tomes of different documents and agreements, but this did not help resolving the problems of its member countries. On the contrary, despite of the difficult inter-ethnic problematic relations of the countries which did not join the CIS, foremostly Estonia, have excelled economically and were able to exit crisis faster. CIS did not prove itself in its 4 years of existence.¹⁵

In other words, the political elites clearly expressed their opinion that for countries like Kazakhstan, economic integration within the former Soviet space was inevitable. It was Belarus and Russia who signed the first agreements in 1995, an Agreement on a Customs Union. In 1996 Russia and Belarus signed an agreement to create a common bilateral community and one year later both countries signed the Treaty on Union of Russia and Belarus. About the same time in 1995, Kazakhstan joined the Russia–Belarus Customs Union. Two other Central Asian Republics, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, joined in the late 1990s. In 1999 Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Kyrgyzstan signed an agreement on the formation of the Customs Union and the Single Economic Sphere. One year later, in 2000, these countries, along with Tajikistan, formed the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) that was based on the previous Customs Union between the five states. However, all of these attempts saw only partial success and commitment from all of the member countries. And only in July 2010 was formed the most recent and possibly the most successful attempt at a fully fledged Customs Union between Kazakhstan, Belarus and Russia. The initial 2010 agreement (now the Union also includes Armenia and Kyrgyzstan) opened up borders and created a single market of 170 million people between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus – a message that clearly became a slogan for President Putin and Nazarbayev.

The presidential rhetoric is particularly important to note as all five presidents of the member states of the EEU, most actively Russia’s President Putin, Kazakhstan’s President Nazarbayev and Belarus’ President Lukashenka are the main creators and presenters of

the political discourse on Eurasianism. Whether the pragmatic approach of President Lukashenka or the more ideological approaches of presidents Nazarbayev and Putin, the Eurasianist discourse is primarily produced by these top elites. Kyrgyz President Atambayev and Armenian President Sargsyan only recently joined this pool of discourse-making. Other members of the political body, prime ministers, leaders of the major parties, members of the EEU administrative body or members of the political opposition either reflect the dominant presidential discourses or dispute them without offering any viable alternative discourse or view.

Kyrgyzstan

Post-Soviet discourses in Kyrgyzstan echoed the dissatisfaction with the Soviet Union following the 'postcolonial' rhetoric of domination from the centre (Moscow). Similarly to the situation in Kazakhstan, the president became the main spokesman of the prevailing political discourse. Up until the regime's instability due to elite contestation and the first Tulip revolution in 2005, it was Kyrgyzstan's first President Askar Akayev who engaged in and produced the integrationist discourse both abroad (in discussions with other Central Asian presidents and with the CIS leaders) and domestically (through the local media). Thus, President Akayev's post-Soviet regime was quick to manufacture the new truth about the recent Soviet past. As he put it, 'throughout many decades of the Soviet power the Centre always existed and this centre drew all of the demands and requests for support and help'. Besides, he continued, 'there was a little space for independent decisions [within Union republics, e.g. in Central Asia]'.¹⁶ The Kyrgyz independent discourse also accounted for the economic disintegration and the chaos of the late 1980s when the 'Centre no longer could provide' the real, material support and 'the economy started breaking down and there were difficult provisional issues'.¹⁷

By the mid-1990s the regime had created a widespread discourse about Kyrgyz independence and statehood, its rich heritage and continuous traditions of good governance. The state, the Kyrgyz nation and its independence became the highest values expressed by the elites (Laruelle, 2012; Marat, 2008). Such discourses were built on the values of 'our ancestors' and pressed for the importance of stability and against any regional disputes that would only destroy 'stability in the country'. These discourses were almost identical to those in Kazakhstan at the same time.

We can identify these processes in the official discourse dissemination with the creation of a nationalized vision of political development. Akayev's regime's attempt to establish a sense of a solid national ideology in the wake of insecure state-building and fragile intra-elite relations gave rise to sentiments of further instability and nationalism in the country. The two revolutions of 2005 and 2010 further exacerbated the issues of stability and state capacity in Kyrgyzstan. All of these also created difficult conditions for economic development, therefore the re-integration into the Eurasian region was considered as an important and also most pressing issue.

Kyrgyzstan's top exporting countries are Switzerland (\$513 M) and Kazakhstan (\$354 M) with Russia coming in fifth place (\$151 M). China (\$2.48 B), Russia (\$2.01 B) and Kazakhstan (\$643 M) are the biggest import sources for Kyrgyzstan. Top exports are gold, refined petroleum, fruit and also textiles. Borders play an important role for Kyrgyz exports to Kazakhstan and Russia as they ensure faster and easier trade. The unilateral Kazakhstan's decision

to close the border with Kyrgyzstan during the 2010 Osh events, for example, caused major losses for the local Kyrgyz businesses along with raised political concerns.

Moreover, the issue of migration is one of the driving forces for political elites in Kyrgyzstan to accept the ideas of their own Eurasian integration. Out of one million of Kyrgyz citizens¹⁸ working abroad, 92% migrated to Russia and the remaining 8% to Kazakhstan.¹⁹ The main reason for migration is to improve the personal financial situation:

All migrants are waiting for Kyrgyz Republic to join the Customs Union – all of these migration issues would be solved, allowing people to work without hindrance in Customs Union countries. I think the opportunity for workers to move freely will change the current situation of having to constantly leave the country and come back again, register every three months, and so on. Kazakhstan is a Customs Union member and Kazakhs are free to work in Russia as they like, which is very convenient.²⁰

The economic issues and issues of stability and state capacity are identical and as pressing in Kyrgyzstan as they are in Kazakhstan. There are also similarities in both states' approach to nationalism and nation-building in the wake of the regimes' further needs to legitimate their agenda to the growing numbers of titular ethnic groups of Kyrgyz and Kazakh populations. However, there is a difference in both states where the majority of Kyrgyzstan's migration force comes from the predominantly ethnic Kyrgyz southern region and Kazakhstan's pressure comes from the Northern Russophobic regions bordering with Russia. These are the challenges both regimes will face in the nearest future with the advances of further Eurasian economic integration.

The evolution of popular responses to Eurasian integration in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

How did Kazakhstani and Kyrgyz citizens respond to these various integration talks and discourses? The results of numerous opinion polls demonstrate a growing tendency towards favouring integration. The latest 2015 Integrationist Barometer²¹ demonstrates that citizens of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are the biggest Eurasian-optimists. Kyrgyzstan scored the highest level (86%) of popular support for the EEU and Eurasian integration, followed by Kazakhstan (80%) and the Russian Federation (78%). Citizens of Armenia and Belarus, by contrast, demonstrate more scepticism with just 56% and 60% of support, respectively. Importantly, the citizens of Tajikistan demonstrated the highest social support for Eurasian integration among the non-member countries of the Union.

Kazakhstani citizens were traditionally more inclined towards integration. Fears over security, armed conflicts and economic instability prevailed in the 1990s and were identified as the main motivation towards a possible integration.

The results of an opinion poll conducted in December 1991 in Almaty, for example, revealed the following integrationist trends. More than 31% of respondents positively viewed a future union among the Central Asian states. The majority of respondents decided that Kazakhstan should then form a separate Union with Central Asian republics rather than with Russia or the other states in the CIS. More than 24% decided that Kazakhstan should not join any integrationist project unless all Central Asian republics were included in such a project. The question 'If Kazakhstan had to decide, to make a choice about further integration what would be more productive and logical?' collected the majority response for Kazakhstan to be an independent intermediary between Russia

and the Central Asian republics in any further integration discussions. The pervasiveness of the economic Eurasianist discourse pursued by the political elites and political commentators in the official media (e.g. in *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* weekly publications), thus, gradually changed the opinions shared by the local Kazakhstani residents.

The main reasons for integration indicated by Kazakhstani respondents in various regions were predominantly security-related – either to enhance security in the region (Asia, Central Asia, Eurasia) or to fight any threats of international terrorism. In 2003 more than 80% of respondents in Almaty (Kazakhstan's biggest urban centre) agreed that Kazakhstan needed an economic and political union with a neighbouring state, preferably Russia (84.9%).²² The data from the second wave of Zadorin, Moysov, & Khalkina (2012) demonstrated that 47% of respondents in Kazakhstan (the highest percentage among all surveyed groups in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine) believed that the country should integrate equally with Russia and with the West. A total of 33% agreed that the country should integrate more with Russia (13% only with Russia and 20% more with Russia than with the West).

In 2005, 49% of Kazakhstan citizens knew little (or something) about the EEU and 14% declared to know nothing. Russia and Belarus showed the highest percentages of people unaware of what the EEU was – 27% and 25% of respondents knew nothing about it in Russia and Belarus, respectively. Kazakhstanis were also more positive towards the increase in market share from EEU member states, had the highest support for the EEU member states' banking (70%) and supported Kazakhstani businessmen's further possible development across the borders and their investment in the economies of other EEU states via the acquisition of factories and companies abroad in the EEU. In the 2006 Eurasian Monitor, the integration incentives of Kazakhstani citizens demonstrated a shift against integration. The majority of respondents preferred to live in their own country without any integration with other countries and without entering into any union. Almost a quarter of the respondents wanted to live in a union with Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

The 2014 Eurasian Integration Barometer data showed that Kazakhstani citizens were the biggest proponents of the Customs Union, with its free trade and single economic space, more than 84% of the respondents were 'certainly affirmative' about their country's membership in the Customs Union. Russian Federation respondents came closest to this positive response with 79%. Compared to the lowest (22%) of affirmation in Azerbaijan or the highest indifference rate (24%) in Belarus, Kazakh citizens were the biggest proponents of these ideas in April 2014.²³ In comparison, Kyrgyz citizens were ranged somewhere in the middle with 50% of positive affirmation and 30% of negative responses. In the most recent integration barometer of 2014, 85% of Kazakhstani respondents indicated Russia as the country most friendly to their nation. These respondents also believed that their country could rely on Russia in a difficult moment or crisis situation. The further ranking of countries that could be relied upon was Kyrgyzstan (32%), Uzbekistan (22%), Turkey (21%) and China (20%). Only 10–15% indicated the USA, UK, France or Germany. A similar question in Russia indicated 65% for Belarus and 42% for Kazakhstan. Fifty-seven per cent of Kazakhstani also believe they can rely on Russia in a military or security crisis.

There remains a question for the Nazarbayev regime in the on-going Eurasian integration: Is the Eurasian identity a viable alternative to the national identity in Kazakhstan?

This is one of the pressing questions for Kazakhstani society and for its Russian-speaking minorities. The elites' decision-making in nation and identity building in Kazakhstan is highly contextual and the level of ambiguity over new projects is much higher. With the growing anxiety over the dissatisfaction of small and medium range businesses with the economic integration, the growth of the ethno-nationalist threats and anti-Eurasian Union campaigns this might all put the regime in a more difficult context of choosing one path to the development.

Integrationist opinion polls in Kyrgyzstan²⁴ demonstrated a consistent interest in integrating with, and attracting investments from, the post-Soviet countries. In 2012 the majority of the respondents in Kyrgyzstan (62%) favoured foreign investments from the former Soviet states, 27% from the European Union (one of the lowest indicators). More than 90% of Kyrgyz respondents also viewed post-Soviet states as the most friendly states who could assist Kyrgyzstan in any difficult situation. In 2013, Kyrgyz respondents demonstrated a positive view towards their country's accession to the Customs Union (72%).²⁵

In 2014, however, Kyrgyz respondents were more sceptical towards integration. In the light of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine and anti-Russian sanctions, the positive view on accession dropped from 67% to 50%. Another recent sociological study also shows that more than 50% of Kyrgyzstan's respondents support their country's membership of the EEU. Experts quote two reasons for such support: free access to the larger labour markets within the Union and political-economic stability.²⁶ Along with this drop in support but consistent interest in terms of migration, Kyrgyz respondents nevertheless demonstrated an increase in negative perceptions of the EEU.²⁷ These results are quite complex and contextual though. The 2015 Gallup research findings also demonstrate that around 79% of Kyrgyzstan's citizens nevertheless supported policies of the Russian Federation. Kyrgyzstan came second after Tajikistan (95%) in supporting Russian policies whereas Kazakhstan came fourth (72%) and Belarus ninth (62%).²⁸

Conclusion

The Eurasian integration in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is a complex process in the making. The integration discourses in both countries developed since the early 1990s and were mainly addressed by the top political elites. The presidents are the key spokesmen and discourse makers in the EEU in general but the role of Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev is especially important. As one of the first political proponents of the Eurasian Union, he consolidated the narratives of re-building links and establishing connectivity among the post-Soviet states. This consolidation was a consistent theme in foreign policy and also domestically but mainly addressed from the economic point of view. The socio-cultural aspects of Eurasianism entered Nazarbayev's rhetoric in the 2000s but the narratives of the common Eurasian destiny, the future creation of common Eurasian cultural and humanitarian values, knowledge exchanges and scientific networks are still settling into the overall discourse. The country's substantial Russian-speaking minorities continue to view Eurasian integration idea as an alternative political identity in the region but at present this rhetoric is too weak to allow any particular conclusions.

What is clear though is that the Eurasian discourse is used by the political elites in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as a legitimization tool for the provision of stability and security, economic development (though with immediate economic consequences, see Satpayev,

2014a, 2014b), and open routes for migration and mobility. The social support is also structured along these key narratives. Kazakhstani and Kyrgyz respondents continue to support the EEU although their scepticism is growing over the Ukrainian crisis, anti-Russian sanctions, and currency devaluations in Russia and Kazakhstan.

Notes

1. Higley and Pakulski (2000) 'Elite Theory versus Marxism. The twentieth century's verdict', p. 229.
2. Many mid-range businesses in Kazakhstan view the country's participation in the Customs Union as actually harmful to the local producers who are not able to compete with the cheaper Russian, Byelorussian and now also Kyrgyz products. 'Our middle and small-range local producers are not able to compete within the Customs Union framework with Belarus and Russia [...]' commented Timur Nazkhanov, Vice-President of the Independent Association of Entrepreneurs (Kazakhstan). 'Look, the majority of the products we consume at the moment are already imported. Russia already almost entirely expanded to our [Kazakhstani] market' (Ikonnikov, 2012).
3. Laruelle (2014), for example, mentions how the renaming of the Leo Gumilev University in Astana was one of the attempts to highlight Kazakhstan's goals towards achieving a common 'humanitarian' and cultural Eurasian space. See also prominent Kazakh writer Olzhas Suleimenov's interview (Suleimenov, 2014).
4. See Georgy Mamedov's forthcoming chapter on 'The illusions of the Soviet: Conservative turn in Kyrgyzstan.' Forthcoming in Mamedov and Shatalova (Eds.). *The concepts of the Sovietness (Ponyatiia o sovetskoi)*, Bishkek: SHTAB. The author discusses the parliamentarian and political discourses on the 'gay propaganda' amendments, for example, to the Criminal Law (seeking punishment for the positive propaganda for LGBTQ). A number of similar laws were widely discussed in Russia and an amendment to the protection of children from gay propaganda came into force in Russia in June 2013.
5. Anderson and Klimov (2012, p. 13) also stress Uzbekistan's protectionist 'trade regime' and note that even though 'Uzbekistan has bilateral free trade agreements' with a number of post-Soviet countries including 'Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, [...] Russia' and other countries 'these agreements are implemented (at least partially), but have narrow coverage'.
6. Islam Karimov's speech, retrieved September 1, 2014, <http://president.uz/ru/news/5001/>
7. Islam Karimov's speech, retrieved September 1, 2014, <http://president.uz/ru/news/5001/>
8. The share of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan decreased since independence. In 1989, ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Slavs outnumbered ethnic Kazakhs (only 39.7%). The ethnic Russian share of the population reached 37.8% in the 1989 census but in 2009 their share had dropped to 23.7% whereas the share of ethnic Kazakhs had increased to 63.1%. This representation, however, does not cover either the substantial linguistic divide where many urban ethnic Kazakhs remain largely Russophone nor the geographical spread of Russian-speaking minorities who primarily reside in the northern borderlands along the Russo-Kazakh border. In the mid-1990s Kazakhstan saw a vast wave of Russian out-migration due to economic instability. The Russian-speaking minority in Kyrgyzstan is also a visible political issue. Ethnic Russians constituted 21.5% in 1989 but according to the official censuses, this figure was down to 12.5% in 1999 and just 7.8% in 2009. The russophone Kyrgyz population is also predominantly urban as in Kazakhstan.
9. Popov (2013), for example, mentions the complex web of interests among political and economic elites in Kazakhstan. This complexity is defined by the 'existence of the several large groups of influence with differentiated interests who are oriented to Russia, the West, China and Turkey'. He states that the Kazakh regime's continued support for the Eurasian Economic Union and further integration with Russia in particular would depend on the power and establishment of one of the groups in a 'post-Nazarbayev period'.

10. In the light of the most recent currency crisis and differences in import prices for goods, small and mid-range businesses were put in a particularly vulnerable position. In 2013, their share in the country's GDP constituted less than 20% (Savina, 2013). Many politicians also feared the reflection of anti-Russian sanctions on Kazakhstan especially in terms of the decrease of the country's credit ratings (Moody's and Standard and Poor's just in 2014 fell to 4.5% 'mirroring' Russia). See Satpayev 'Treshini v Tamozhennom Soyuze' ['Cracks in the Customs Union'].
11. Satpayev, Dosym. 2014. 'Evraziiski ekonomicheskii soyuz – poezd ili podlodka?' ['Eurasian Economic Union – a train or a submarine?'].
12. see Savina (2013).
13. Nazarbayev, pp. 406–408.
14. President Nazarbayev's interview to 'Hokkaido Sinbun,' Op. 1, F. 7 'President of KazSSR,' Presidential Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Almaty.
15. Tazhin (1994).
16. Akayev (2004, p.169).
17. Akayev (2004, p.169).
18. In 2013 this accounted to one-fifth of the total population (5.72 million).
19. 'Labor Migration and Human Capital of Kyrgyzstan: Impact of the Customs Union,' 2013.
20. From the Kyrgyz migrant worker in Kazakhstan, interview excerpt from the 'Labor Migration and Human Capital of Kyrgyzstan: Impact of the Customs Union,' 2013 EDB report, p. 13.
21. Conducted since 2012 by the Eurasian Bank for Development. The 2015 poll was conducted in Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan and Ukraine with a random sample of 11,000.
22. 'Komkon-2 Eurasia' survey in Almaty, 13–14 March 2003 among 300 respondents (random sample) in Almaty.
23. Eurasian Integration Barometer 2014 data.
24. EDB Integration Barometer 2012 Data. Kyrgyz sample – 1000 respondents in 2012.
25. EDB Integration Barometer 2013 Data.
26. Bannikov 2015, retrieved from <http://www.news-asia.ru/view/ks/politics/8643>
27. EDB Integration Barometer 2014 Data.
28. Gallup data quoted in [gezitter.org](http://www.gezitter.org), retrieved from http://www.gezitter.org/politic/40920_Gallup_v_kyrgyzstane_dominiruet_vliyanie_kremlya_/

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