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TITLE: Regional Integration Efforts in The Post-Cold War USSR Geography: The Eurasian Economic Union

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**Soğuk Savaş Sonrası SSCB Coğrafyasında Bölgesel Bütünleşme Çabaları:
Avrasya Ekonomik Birliği****Regional Integration Efforts in The Post-Cold War USSR Geography: The
Eurasian Economic Union**Meram TATLI¹**Özet**

ABD'nin post-Sovyet bölgesi ve Asya-Pasifik coğrafyasındaki egemen güç olma çabası, bölge ülkelerine karşı çevreleme politikası izlemesi, Çin ve Rusya Federasyonu dâhil birçok ülkeyi rahatsız etmiştir. Böyle bir uluslararası ortamda, post-Sovyet bölgesinde bağımsızlıklarını ilan eden ülkelerin ekonomik, siyasi ve sosyal sorunlarını çözmek amacıyla kurulan Avrasya Ekonomik İş birliği Örgütü (AEB), stratejik hedeflere odaklanarak zamansal bir evrim geçirmiştir. Bu yapılanma, günümüzde ilişkilerini çeşitlendirip, politika, ekonomi, güvenlik ve diplomasi alanlarında gelişim göstererek, post-Sovyet coğrafyasındaki önemli bir stratejik oluşum aşamasına gelmiştir. Bu çalışma, post-Sovyet coğrafyasındaki yeni stratejik oluşumları inceleyerek, bölgedeki entegrasyon süreçlerinin somut bir yansıması olan Avrasya Ekonomik İş birliği Örgütü'nün önemini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmada, "Avrasya Ekonomik İş birliği Örgütü'ne üye devletlerin, politika, güvenlik, ekonomi ve diğer alanlardaki iş birliğini geliştirerek post-Sovyet coğrafyasındaki güçlü bir bölgesel entegrasyon yapısına ulaşabilecekleri" hipotezi test edilmiştir. Çalışmada, post-Sovyet coğrafyası hakkında genel bilgi verilerek, Soğuk Savaş ve sonrasındaki bölgesel gelişmeler ele alınmış ve Avrasya Ekonomik Birliği'nin önemi vurgulanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Avrasya Ekonomik Birliği, Bölgesel Örgüt, Soğuk Savaş.*

Abstract

The emergence of the United States as the dominant power in the post-Soviet region and the Asia-Pacific geography, and its policy of containment towards the countries of the region, has disturbed many countries, including China and the Russian Federation. In such an international environment, the Eurasian Economic Cooperation Organisation (EECO), which was established with the aim of solving the economic, political and social problems of the countries that had declared their independence in the post-Soviet region, has temporarily focused on strategic goals. Today, by elaborate its relations and developing its political, economic, security and diplomatic fields, this organisation has entered a concrete and important structuring stage in the post-Soviet geography. The purpose of this study is to reveal the significance of the Eurasian Economic Cooperation Organisation, which is the operational application of integration formations in the region, by addressing the newly formed strategic formations in the post-Soviet geography. The study tested the hypothesis that "the member states of the Eurasian Economic Cooperation Organisation will be able to develop a strong regional integration structure in the post-Soviet geography by developing cooperation in the political, security, economic and other spheres". By providing general information on the post-Soviet geography, the study assesses the situation that emerged in the region during and after the Cold War and highlights the importance of the Eurasian Economic Union.

Keywords: *Cold War Era, Regional Organization, Eurasian Economic Union.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The end of the Cold War era brought new hopes and concerns. The collapse of the Eastern bloc and the USSR led to the emergence of new independent actors and a power vacuum in the region. As the newly independent countries sought to find their place on the international stage, security, political, social and economic problems began to emerge in the region. The region has geopolitical and geostrategic importance and is an area with the characteristics of a global arena. Security strategies are being developed to deal with the problems in the region and commercial activities are being carried out in a competitive environment. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian government has been trying to build a new structure for the Eurasian geography in order to ensure political autonomy and stability in both domestic and foreign policy, and to compete strongly in the global economy. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was created in 1991 to address the political, economic and security problems that emerged after the collapse of the USSR. Throughout the 1990s, integration efforts in the Eurasian region progressed slowly and various agreements were made by the CIS member states to create a regional union (usually on a bilateral basis). Although there were many ambitious initiatives, there were no viable plans until the idea of a Eurasian Economic Union came to the fore. The Eurasian Economic Community (EEU) was established in 2000 with the aim of establishing common trade cooperation, followed by the Eurasian Customs Union on 1 January 2010. After several regional stages (Common Economic Space, Eurasian Economic Community, Single Economic Market, Customs Union), Russia succeeded in establishing the Eurasian Economic Union in early 2015, comprising Armenia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Russia. The EEU not only ensures the free movement of services and goods, but also implements common policies in many different areas, including macroeconomics, industry, agriculture, energy, transport, customs, competition and anti-monopoly legislation.

With the radical changes in the geography of the USSR after the Cold War, the balance of power in the international arena shifted from bipolar to unipolar. These events had the greatest impact on the former Eurasian geography and led to the creation of new independent states in this region. The region has a very important geopolitical and geostrategic position in the international arena. The countries of the region are engaged in regional cooperation against US hegemony. Russia and China, which are important states in the region, are increasing their influence in the post-Soviet geography and want to keep the region in their sphere of influence. Although there are problems in the region that prevent the formation of a union, if these problems are solved, it is envisaged that the Eurasian Economic Union can exist as an international organisation with the participation of the powerful countries surrounding the region.

In this study, the main purpose of which is to analyse the power gap that occurred in the post-Soviet geography after the Cold War and the attempt to fill this absence by the United States and NATO is seen as a threat to the hegemonic states in the region, and the formation of integration as a response to this threat is supported by the countries of the region and the structure and significance of the Eurasian Economic Union established in this context; This study sought to answer the questions of what kind of strategy the post-Soviet states have adopted in the face of global and regional problems, and how regional integration has influenced this process. In order to analyse the development and significance of the Eurasian Economic Union, this study uses a qualitative approach based on recent data from a comprehensive literature review. It is based on the hypothesis that although the EEU was established with the aim of solving economic problems, it is the most important step in these cooperation efforts, and that in the future the member states of the EEU will make a serious contribution to the formation of a multipolar world order by adopting an allied stance on international issues. The study uses a variety of sources, including official documents, statements by state officials, academic studies and economic analyses. The study will both contribute to the literature by explaining the importance of the EAEU's regional influence in the post-Soviet geography and be unique in assessing the impact of this integration process on the member states.

2. EURASIAN GEOGRAPHY AFTER THE COLD WAR

In time, it is an undeniable fact that events have a beginning and an end, and the 40-year history of the Cold War has now come to an end. In this long period, while the Cold War rivalry between East and West dominated the period between 1945 and 1960, there was a period of détente between East and West, especially after 1970. The 1960s represent an intermediate period in the transition from the Cold War to the present. This period was a clear indicator of efforts to create a soft structure in the system, both in terms of conflicts and struggles and in terms of international relations. The most decisive factor in the paradoxical developments between 1960 and 1970 was the transformation of the countries of both blocs (Armaoğlu, 2012, p. 273). According to modern geopolitical experts, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was largely due to strategic weaknesses between the East and the West. According to these thinkers, the United States of America kept control over the eastern and western border regions as much as possible and consequently did not allow integration between the countries. It thus contributed to the spontaneous collapse of the Eastern bloc. The end of the bipolar structure was strategically seen as a blow to post-Soviet geography, continentality and the possible sovereignty of all post-Soviet states (Dugin, 2014, p. 10). In the international arena, the change of the global system with the end of the Cold War, in other words, the disappearance of the Cold War cycle based on the bipolar structure, led to the prominence of the Rimland region on the East-West line and the expansion of geopolitical and geocultural gaps on the North-South transport routes (Alwort, 1994, p. 527). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet geography once again became the focus of the geopolitical interests of the global powers. The process of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (reconstruction) that began in the Soviet Union in 1985 with Gorbachev's rise to power led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, major changes occurred in the international system and new structures were formed (Tellal, 2010, p. 205). Davutoğlu (2009) considers the dissolution of the USSR to be one of the three most important geopolitical earthquakes of the twentieth century and states that this event would both trigger a new crisis in the global structure and offer a number of opportunities. The end of the Cold War opened the door to change and transformation in the Soviet Union, and this change led to fifteen states declaring their independence. The countries that declared their independence have continued to assert themselves in the international arena and have worked hard to do so. In the changing conjuncture of the post-Cold War global arena, the post-Soviet countries that declared independence sought to become nation-states and tried to get rid of the idea of imperialism that had prevailed in the Soviet period.

The identity problems created in this geography during the USSR period have become a serious problem for the countries after independence. Although there are common religious, linguistic and cultural factors between the states, the ethnic discourses left over from the seventy years of the Soviet Union and the marginalisation caused by these ethnic discourses have led to a region-based geo-cultural separation. At that time, political border problems were on the agenda between the countries that had declared their independence, each state had the idea of establishing a nation-state, and this led to mutual rivalries (Sancak, 2002, p. 142).

Davutoğlu (2009, pp. 465-467) analysed the changes in the post-Soviet region after the collapse of the Soviet Union under three headings: economic, political and cultural. The cultural transformation is one of the important pillars of the transformations in the post-Soviet region. While this transformation ensured the adoption of the Soviet identity as the supreme identity, it led to the suppression of other identities living in the geography. This structuring has prevented the emergence of ethnic divisions, the fragmentation of the cultural structure formed in the region, and the formation of a common national consciousness. In the post-Cold War period, these cultural and social differences have led to conflicts and disputes in the region. Another problem among the states of the post-Soviet region has been border disputes. Border disputes between countries in the region have sometimes led to conflict and migration. Another pillar of change in this process has manifested itself in the economic system. In the economic structure, the countries' past dependence on the Soviet economy has created problems in the post-Soviet period and led to the restructuring of institutions. The Soviet economic system in the internal and external political structure increased the dependence

of the countries in the region, reduced their economic self-sufficiency and prevented them from integrating into the international arena.

During the Soviet period, countries tried to create their national economies through economic planning, which was created so that the underground resources of the countries would be gathered in one place and spent for the great Russian ideal (Geybullayev and Kurubaş, 2002, p. 21). The countries that declared their independence experienced great problems in the transition from the centralised structure of the USSR period to a free market economy. Another problem experienced in this geography was the democratisation efforts in the political sphere. In the process of political restructuring, the countries of the region entered a stable structuring phase (Davutoğlu 2009, p. 468). Leadership rivalries among the post-Soviet countries have created obstacles to unity and solidarity in the region. The emergence of these problems in the post-Cold War period also disturbed regional and global powers. Therefore, despite the post-USSR disorder, these countries have sought to establish order and have made strategic moves in this direction. The energy resources, economic structure, geopolitical position and demography of this region have intensified the struggle of powerful states for dominance in the region.

Russia, one of the countries of the post-Soviet geographical region, is strengthening its sovereignty, but it is also one of the pillars of the geopolitical architecture of the global space. Russia has approached the region with a post-Soviet policy. This policy was presented as a conceptual and fictional system of thought that would solve the problems Russia faced in the post-Soviet region after the collapse of the Soviet Union and reintegrate Russia's disintegrated and fragmented civilisational identity. Russia's isolation of the post-Soviet geography is identified with its traditional, historical and national interests. The post-Soviet region is a geography with which Russia cannot break relations in order to feed its historical imperialist identity and be an element of prestige in the global arena. Russia does not want any Western state (the USA) to have access to the post-Soviet geography and does not allow it to establish dominance here. In this framework, different structures have been created for the problems of the region and with these structures it is aimed to develop the post-Soviet geography and to keep the USA away from this region.

3. REGIONAL INTEGRATION PROCESS BEFORE THE EURASIAN ECONOMIC UNION

The disintegration of the USSR and the reintegration of the former Soviet republics with each other took place almost simultaneously (Molchanov, 2015, p. 26).⁸ On 8 December 1991, in Minsk, the heads of state of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus signed the Declaration and Treaty on the Establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States. These documents declared that the USSR was no longer a subject of international law or a geographical reality and announced that the Commonwealth of Independent States was open for membership not only to all former Soviet member states, but also to all countries that accepted the principles and objectives of this founding treaty (CIS, Treaty Establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States, 1991). At the Alma-Ata Summit on 21 December, the five Central Asian republics that had declared their intention to join the CIS signed the Alma-Ata Declaration and the Protocol to the Commonwealth Pact, which was signed by the leaders of all the countries of the former Soviet Union except the three Baltic states and Georgia. According to this declaration, the CIS is defined neither as a state nor as a superstate structure. The CIS states that cooperation will be pursued on the basis of equality through co-ordinating organisations established on the basis of equality (CIS, Alma-Ata Declaration, 1991). The CIS Charter came into force in 1993, but Ukraine, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova refused to sign it. Azerbaijan refused to sign the CIS Charter, but Moldova signed it in 1994. However, Turkmenistan has officially accepted the status of associate member since 2005, and Ukraine has acted as a full member, although it has never ratified the Charter (Cooper, 2013, p. 16). Similar to the Alma-Ata Declaration, the Charter defines the CIS in the following terms: the community does not have the status of a state, it does not possess international powers, and its member states are independent and equal actors subject to international law (Charter of the Commonwealth of Independent States, 1993). In fact, the organisational structure of the CIS is described as a confederation-like centre formed by states striving for closer cooperation between different categories of member states and a more flexible system of legal relations with other

members, based on different types of membership, annotations to the founding treaties, and limited participation in the legal activities of the community (Voitovich, 1993, p. 417).

The main objectives of the Union are set out in the fourth and nineteenth articles of the Charter. According to the fourth article, these objectives include cooperation in the field of foreign policy, cooperation in the creation and development of a common economic space, the creation of a common Eurasian and European market and coordination of customs policy, cooperation in the field of defence and border protection. Its nineteenth article provides for the free movement of capital, services, labour, goods and services and the establishment of a common economic space based on a market economy (Charter of the Commonwealth of Independent States, 1993). Although the CIS aimed at political integration through cooperation in areas such as defence and foreign policy, its main objective was to maintain vital economic ties in the post-Soviet space while providing a framework for the gradual opening of the mostly uncompetitive economies of the member states to the global market (Molchanov, 2015, p. 26). However, the CIS's aspirations for economic integration were expressed from the very beginning. Therefore, in 1993, all CIS member states signed the Treaty on the Establishment of an Economic Union, which paved the way for a gradual process of economic integration. This process was to begin with the establishment of a free trade partnership, followed by a customs union, a common market for the free movement of goods, services, labour and capital, and finally a monetary union. The treaty did not set a specific timeframe for the establishment of this integration process, given the very different economic development of the member states (Cooper, 2013, p. 16). Furthermore, the weak legal structure of the CIS allowed each member state to determine its own level of commitment, thus weakening the permanent commitment of the member states to this organisation (Wirminghaus, 2012, p. 32). In addition, economic integration efforts within the CIS failed to achieve their goal, as Russia did not ratify the free trade agreement, which was the founding goal of the organisation. As a result, trade relations between CIS member states are governed by a complex set of bilateral agreements, many of which are dysfunctional (Purtaş, 2004, pp. 64-66). Free trade agreements have also not been established under the CIS umbrella, but through bilateral or regional agreements. For example, in the period 1992-1994, Russia signed FTAs with all CIS member states except Ukraine through a series of bilateral agreements and protocols (Webber, 1996, p. 295). Economic integration in the post-Soviet space continued with a regional project led by some Central Asian countries. In this framework, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan established the Central Asian Economic Union in 1994 to create a common economic structure. These countries also established a permanent executive committee, an intergovernmental council and a Central Asian Cooperation and Development Bank (Kumar, 1998, pp. 1014-1015). However, all these regional integration efforts led by the Central Asian states have not been successful, partly due to the lack of complementary economic resources and the competition for regional hegemony between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (Kubicek, 2009, p. 246). Looking at the CIS, although it has not achieved its goals in terms of economic integration, it has managed to expand its sphere of activity as it has undertaken important activities to promote economic, social, cultural and educational cooperation among its member states (Cooper, 2013, p. 31). In addition, the CIS Free Trade Agreement was signed in October 2011 between Armenia, Belarus, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Ukraine. While Uzbekistan signed this agreement in 2012, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan opted out of the agreement (CIS, Commonwealth of Independent States Free Trade Agreement, 2011).

In the context of the regional projects of the Central Asian states, Russia has taken a leading role in the establishment and implementation of many sub-regional activities of the CIS. Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus acceded to the Customs Union Treaty in 1996. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan joined in 1996 and 1997 respectively. Also in 1996, Russia and Belarus signed an agreement on the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent Republics. The agreement included the creation of a single currency for the two countries by the end of 1997, as well as a common economic budget, a common trade and customs system, and common tax and investment laws (Danilovich, 2006, p. 60). A year later, both Russia and Belarus signed and brought into force the Union Treaty. This treaty established a common presidency, a common constitution, a common army and a common citizenship system between the two countries. However, political disputes between the leaders of the two states - Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko - have largely hindered the union project. As noted above, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have attempted to establish a customs union, but this has

been no more than a declaration of intent and a limited step towards the establishment of a functional, real union (Cooper, 2013, p. 18).

Kyrgyzstan's accession to the World Trade Organisation and the economic crisis that erupted in Russia in 1998 led to the conclusion that the existing Russian-led CIS sub-regional projects had failed and that other organisations aimed at economic integration needed to be created. In 1999, Belarus, Russia, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan signed the Single Economic Space and Customs Union Treaty. In 2000, this treaty was transformed into a full-fledged international organisation called the Eurasian Economic Community (EEEC). The treaty formally establishing the EEEC entered into force in 2003. The EEEC created an institutional framework inspired by the legislation of the European Union and led to a number of EU-like economic integration efforts in the post-Soviet space. The treaty formally establishing the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) came into force in 2003 (EUEA, 15.11.2024, www.eaeunion.org). The EEC created an institutional framework inspired by European Union legislation and led to a number of EU-like economic integration efforts in the post-Soviet space. Russia's integration efforts led to the establishment of the Single Economic Space (SES) in 2003, including Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan (en.kremlin.ru/, 2004). Although the SES agreement entered into force for all ratifying states, the TEA process faced strong internal opposition in Ukraine. Following the Orange Revolution in 2004, Ukraine expressed its reluctance to share sovereignty and supported the creation of a free trade area, opposing the single economic space project. As a result, the four-country TEA initiative was suspended at the end of 2005. In 2005, Russia succeeded in bringing the Central Asian Economic Union, an organisation of Central Asian countries, into the EEU. As a result, as of 2006 the EEU has five full members (Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Tajikistan, Russia, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) and three observer members (Ukraine, Armenia, Moldova): Ukraine, Armenia and Moldova (Molchanov, 2015, pp. 40-41). The idea of a customs union between the EEC member states was supported, but not all members were willing to form such a union. Therefore, Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus decided to create their own integration by implementing the Eurasian Customs Union at the informal meeting of the EEC in 2006, and an agreement was signed a year later. The three countries established the Customs Union Commission and began to apply first a common customs tariff on 1 January 2010 and then the Customs Union Law in July 2010. Although Vladimir Putin announced in June 2009 that the new customs union could join the World Trade Organisation as a whole, it soon became clear that this decision would delay Russia's accession to the WTO. Accordingly, the approach to other WTO accession negotiations changed (Cooper, 2013, p. 23). In July 2011, internal border controls were abolished. Although the TEA project collapsed with the secession of Ukraine, it is expected to continue mainly through political will.¹⁸ On 18 November 2011, the leaders of the three countries that established the Customs Union adopted the Declaration on Eurasian Economic Integration. This document states that the partners aim to complete the codification of the international agreements that form the legal basis of the Customs Union and the TEA and to establish the Eurasian Economic Union by 1 January 2015. On 1 January 2015, the TEA became operational and on 2 February 2012, the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEEC) replaced the Customs Union Commission as the permanent supranational regulatory body of the Customs Union and the TEA (EEEC, 15.11.2024, www.eaeunion.org).

In summary, the Commonwealth of Independent States is a structure created to ensure the unity of the countries that have declared their independence from the Soviet Union and to prevent the economic, social, political and cultural complexities that may arise in this region. The efforts of the independent states to adapt to the existing international order by their own efforts, their struggle for economic independence and the political changes in the geography of Central Asia have led to the problem of adapting to the conditions of the CIS. In particular, the revolutionary actions that took place in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan in 2000, which were thought to be aimed at destroying Russia's sphere of influence in these countries, led to a questioning of confidence in the integrity of the CIS. As a result of these negative developments, the CIS found it difficult to achieve its original objectives. The successive colour revolutions that took place on the territory of the CIS both affected Russia and caused it to reassess its relations with the West. Indeed, the pro-Western revolutions, first in Georgia and then in Ukraine, posed a serious threat to the CIS, which is a priority in Russian foreign policy. As a result, the missions assigned to the Commonwealth of Independent States could

not be fully realised and the difficulties encountered led to the search for a new and different integration design.

4. REGIONALISM AND IMPORTANCE OF THE EURASIAN ECONOMIC UNION

Since the end of the Cold War, many economic, political and cultural changes have taken place on the international stage. This process has led to increased competition between countries. The dissolution of the USSR had a profound impact on the region, disrupting existing political, social and economic interactions between countries. As a result, the development of the post-Soviet region has led to numerous challenges in various fields (Öztürk, 2013: 229). The USSR encompassed a region where people shared a common language, religion, history and culture. The long existence of the USSR led to the development of similar cultures among the countries of the region, as well as the establishment of a structure based on socio-economic dependence. After the dissolution of the USSR, the establishment of regional integration institutions, recognised as a strategic initiative to promote the development of the post-Soviet region, is a central element of the region's development policy (Dugin, 2015: 68-70). Despite the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States as the first step towards regional development after the dissolution of the USSR, it proved incapable of addressing the economic challenges of the post-Soviet region. This was mainly because the organisation was geared towards political rather than economic objectives.

The Eurasian Economic Union represents the first successful attempt to establish robust multilateral integration institutions at the regional level in the post-Soviet space. The EEU officially came into force on 1 January 2015, following the signing of an agreement by the leaders of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus on 29 May 2014. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined the Union in 2015. The document was seen by Eurasian politicians and experts as both ambitious and realistic, with a focus on economic interests (Yılmaz and Bahrevskiy, 2017: 106-107). The establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union was based on the previous existence of the Customs Union (2010) and the Common Economic Space (2012). The institutional structures of the Eurasian Economic Union include the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC), a permanent supranational body with two representatives from each participating state, the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council, consisting of the prime ministers of the participating states, the Supreme Court of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Court of Justice (Eurasian Economic Commission, www.eurasiancommission.org, 2015).

This economic integration project aims to bring the countries' economic structures and legal *acquis* closer together. In an article published in the Russian newspaper *Izvestia* on 25 October 2011, Nazarbayev defined the principles of the Eurasian Union vision according to four principles (Dugin, 2015, pp. 68-70):

- a. Integration should be based on economic pragmatism.
- b. Member states should decide independently whether they want to stay within their borders or join the globalised world.
- c. The principles of equality, mutual respect for sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of others should be respected.
- d. Member states should create their own national institutions based on the principles of consensus of all participants, without giving up national sovereignty.

In this speech, Nazarbayev said the following about the success of his proposed project: "The reasons for our success are easy to explain. The Eurasian Economic Union project is an understandable and realistic organisation for the citizens of our countries. Our common history, the economic ties between our countries, the close links between our cultures and the common future heritage of our peoples have created opportunities for a new type of multilateral interstate relations for our rights (www.centrasia.ru, 2019)".

The first step towards the integration of the post-Soviet geography was taken with the Eurasian Economic Union. The EEU represents a transition not only for the former post-Soviet states, but also for the Eurasian integration system that began after the Soviet era and is intended to be transformed into a long-term structure (Vousinas, 2014, pp. 952-953). It also applies to states outside

the post-Soviet geopolitical space. The active participation of the region's civil society and business community is seen as an important and indispensable element. New trends in the developing international system (globalisation, transnationalisation, information exchange, etc.) have created new and different temporal lines in interstate relations. In the post-USSR period, almost none of the integration structures in the region reached the stage of integration through intergovernmental and supranational governance models (Popescu, 2014, pp. 9-11). The Eurasian Economic Union is presented as a structure created for the former Eastern bloc states after the collapse of the USSR and conceived as a post-Soviet legacy in the form of an integration programme to restore the interdependent and intertwined order in all spheres and in all respects (Yesdauletova and Yesdauletov, 2014, p. 13).

The Eurasian Economic Union is considered to be an economic organisation based on the principles of preserving the political independence and cultural characteristics of the countries. In this organisation there is a plan to economically transform the whole of Eurasia. Once the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union comes into force, the member states will guarantee the free movement of goods, services, capital and labour within the EEU. It is agreed to coordinate economic policies within the EEU in the fields of energy, industry, agriculture and transport. According to the treaty, a decision was taken in 2016 to establish a common market for pharmaceuticals and other medical supplies, creating a common market with a population of approximately 180 million people (Yılmaz and Bahrevskiy, 2017, pp. 106-107). Popescu (2014, p. 9) noted that the theoretical basis of Russian President Vladimir Putin's Eurasian Economic Union strategy is linked to the multilateral understanding of the international system (which has become a foreign policy theory), and that the Eurasian Union aims to create a global pole by building an effective bridge between the EU and the geography of the former Soviet Union. In fact, he stressed that the Eurasian Union aims to be one of the leading actors in the integration movements around the world and that it is important to develop this gradually in an international geography. Putin stated that the Eurasian Union is an organisation of great political and geopolitical significance and that the Eurasian Union has a global, regional and domestic character. The EEU is an integrated organisation that can be the pole of a multipolar world on a regional scale. As important as the European Union is for the West, the Eurasian Economic Union is very important for the post-Soviet geography. For the influencing and affected countries of the region, it means the integration of the post-Soviet space into a single strategic bloc. It also implies a broad regionalisation to strengthen the cultural, linguistic and social identities of the ethnic groups that make up the traditional composition of the region. The Eurasian Economic Union creates a space of common struggle for a multipolar world based on the cooperation of different peoples, civilisations and cultures for peace and mutual prosperity (Laruelle, 2015, pp. 1-3). It creates a close partnership between European and Asian countries and plays an active role in creating a united Eurasian alliance in the cultural, economic, informational, strategic and political spheres of the post-Soviet space. Efforts will be made to preserve the cultural, religious and ethnic identities of each people and to develop their uniqueness and originality. Strengthening peace and order on the basis of Eurasian principles, the EEU fights against unipolar and one-dimensional globalisation, against such negative trends as cultural corruption, terrorism, drug trafficking, social injustice, and ecological and demographic disasters. At the same time, the EEU seeks to develop economic partnerships between the trade organisations of the post-Soviet continent and supports the development of trade relations between countries. The EEU is seen as a fertile ideological base for strengthening the economic network in its region, both in the East and in the West. The Eurasian Economic Union stands out as an effective and comprehensive organisation in the region.

The process of globalisation and democratisation, as well as the Western orientation and distrust of Russia in the countries that left the USSR, have created difficulties for the policy of regionalisation in the post-Soviet geography. In particular, the influence of Western powers in the region and the fact that the countries neighbouring the West have established closer relations with the West and gradually reduced their dependence on Russia have enabled these countries to move closer to or join Western institutions and power structures, such as NATO and the European Union. As a result, fragmentation and centrifugal forces have become extremely active in Eurasian geography, reducing Russia's sphere of influence and power. Baltic countries such as Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania quickly turned westwards, joining the European Union in 2004 and the eurozone in 2007. In

addition, the colour revolutions have further shaken Moscow's Global position. The colour revolutions in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, even Kyrgyzstan in 2005, and more recently the Movement for Protest and Democracy (2020) in Belarus are clear examples of former Soviet countries distancing themselves from Russia and shifting their relations with the West. The moves by Kiev, Tbilisi and even Baku to join the European Union and NATO pose a major threat to Russia.

The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army in February 2022 is seen as a failure of Russian regional policy and of NATO's approach to Russia's borders. For this reason, Moscow's regionalisation and rapprochement efforts, as well as its experience with former Soviet states in the post-Soviet period, have not been successful. Moreover, Russia accounts for more than 85 per cent of the Eurasian Economic Union's GDP (\$1.7 trillion). Given the economies of the remaining four member states, it would be out of the question for Russia to engage in serious economic trade with these countries. It should be noted that the total economic size of the EEU (\$6565 billion) is smaller than that of Italy (\$265 billion), As well as smaller than that of Brazil or Canada, and slightly larger than the GDP of South Korea (IMF, 2020; World Bank, 2021). Therefore, there is no structural change in the overall economy of the region, and the EEU is not expected to lead the economic development of the region as a whole. In the Russia-centric Eurasian Union, Russia maintains close relations with both Belarus and Kazakhstan and tries to prevent Armenia from cooperating closely with the EU. Today, Russia has been able to extend the Union's borders through Armenia to Iran, a strategically strong country that opposes the West.

From an economic point of view, Armenia, with its weak and small economy (\$13 billion GDP), has little influence on economic relations in the Eurasian region (IMF, 2020). Moreover, Armenia does not share a common border with any other EU member state. Armenia's GDP is about five times smaller than that of Belarus, the smallest economy among the three founding members of the Eurasian Economic Union. In contrast, Kyrgyzstan's economy is even smaller than Armenia's (\$8 billion GDP). Therefore, it cannot play a significant role in the economic projects of the region (Mostafa and Mahmood, 2018; World Bank, 2021). In this context, the accession of Kyrgyzstan and Armenia to the EU is of geopolitical importance for the EU and Russia and is considered a geopolitical success for the Kremlin. There is no doubt that one of Moscow's priorities in the creation of the EEU is geopolitical (Veicy, 2023, p. 177). With the accession of Kazakhstan and Armenia to the EEU, Moscow aims both to expand its sphere of influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus geography and to block China's influence in Central Asia and the West's influence in the Caucasus.

In economic terms, the members of the EEU are not complementary actors. The most important economic members of the EEU are the European Union (53% of exports and 41% of imports) and China (13% of exports and 23% of imports). Of the EEU's exports, 59% are related to energy sources. (Eurasian Development Bank, 2019). According to the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB) (2019), third countries account for a significant share of the EEU's foreign trade. Almost 92 per cent of foreign trade is with third countries, while the volume of trade between the member states of the Union is less than 8 per cent. According to this indicator, compared to the European Union, the rate of trade between EU member states is 64 per cent (Giucci and Mdinaradze, 2017, pp. 16-17). Since the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union until 2018, the share of trade between member states has not changed significantly, remaining at the same level of 8 per cent (Eurasian Development Bank, 2019). Although it has grown slightly in terms of value and volume, the percentage and share of member states in total external trade has remained almost unchanged. This small share is also between Russia and other members. Moreover, there is no trade between Armenia and Kyrgyzstan or between Kyrgyzstan and Belarus. Therefore, there is no great potential for the development of mutual trade and commercial relations between the member states of the Union.

It should not be forgotten that the EEU has a very advantageous position in terms of hydrocarbon reserves and production, which are completely under the control of Kazakhstan and Russia. More than 14% of the world's oil supply (13.5 million barrels per day) (12.1% Russia and 2% Kazakhstan) and around 18% of natural gas supply (702 billion cubic metres) (17% Russia and 0.6% Kazakhstan) belong to the EEU (BP, 2020). However, according to the founding document of the EEU, energy transmission lines are not subject to preferential tariffs and the formulation of a policy in

this regard has been postponed to the future. It seems that, contrary to the economic name of the Union, only political and geopolitical goals are important for Russia.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union after the Cold War, there have been numerous initiatives to promote integration in the post-Soviet space. In practice, however, all these initiatives have been aimed primarily at promoting reciprocal relations between Russia and its partners. Ultimately, at least 29 different regional organisations have been established among all the post-Soviet countries to date, 14 of which are still operational as of 2015. One of the most striking features of almost all these regional integration efforts is that they are Russia-centred. Because they are Russia-centred, they have provided for very little transfer of authority to international institutions and organisations (Gast, 2017). Kassenova (2013, p. 141) interprets Russian policy towards post-Soviet countries as based on bilateral relations with a strong position for the protection of Russia's national economic interests. In this context, bilateral relations are considered more important than multilateral cooperation with Russian geopolitical ambitions. Moreover, the economic rationale for Russia's support for multilateral cooperation in Eurasia today is also controversial (Aslund, 2016). In reality, there is no evidence that the EEU can increase the strength of the Russian economy. As Libman (2017, pp. 88-89) points out, the unification of economic entities through the EEU will hardly increase the economic power of the Russian economy. These EEU member states will undoubtedly play an important role in the integration process and Moscow will have to satisfy their concerns and aspirations (Krickovic, 2014, p. 505). There are different assessments of the Eurasian Economic Union. The most striking among them is that the Russian Federation played a leading role in the formation of this union with the intention of restoring the hegemonic position it lost after the collapse of the USSR, and although it is explained that the structure was established with economic motives, its main goal is to create an international political power. We accept that the Russian Federation is planning to become a hegemonic power again, to be active in the post-Soviet region and, through the Union, to become an international or global actor again. However, it would be unjust to attribute the benefits of the EEU solely to the Russian Federation. With the increase in the number of EU member states, and taking into account the energy reserves of the countries, there is no obstacle to the realisation of great economic and political growth. In response to this assessment, Nazarbayev stated that the Eurasian Economic Union is not a plan to create a new USSR, that it has no political framework, and that its main goal is commercial and economic integration (Tüysüzoğlu, 2014). Igor Shuvalov, who served as deputy prime minister of Russia, stated that the Eurasian Economic Union will adopt a common currency within 10 years, that the common economic space was destroyed with the collapse of the USSR, and that they will try to create a common economic space again as independent countries with the Eurasian Economic Union (Ağır, 2016, pp. 25-27).

In its global position, the organisation tries to exist as a normal regional economic integration. By providing various benefits in the political and cultural fields, it acts as a supporter rather than a competitor of other regionalisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Ağır and Ağır, 2017, p. 115). With the decision of the post-Soviet governments, the EAEU aimed to use a common currency and with this goal, they aimed to reduce the use of the American currency in the region. The organisation aims to become an international structure like the European Union. It is interested in forming a force against the policies that the United States would implement in the post-Soviet geography (Öztürk, 2013, p. 235). The EEU, which has the power to change economic relations in a geography with an average population of one hundred and eighty million people and a gross national product of three trillion dollars, is seen as an alternative structure to the European Union in the post-Soviet region. It is estimated that the applications to be realised with the enlargement of the Union will have positive results and bring various benefits to its members. The EEU has made progress in many areas, especially the economy. Although the crisis in Ukraine and Crimea has shaken the belief that the Eurasian Union project or the Silk Road Economic Belt proposed by China will disrupt Russia's plans for the Central Asian countries, it is clear from the practice that the Union was not established only on the signboard and that it is functional (Ağır, 2016, pp. 25-27). The EEU will increase the economic interdependence between the participating countries in economic terms, provide a stronger position in the field against economic crises, and prevent the occurrence of various problems supported by Western states in the participating countries. It is believed that the economic relations between the EEU countries can be a solution to both political and social problems. It is obvious that

the economic formation to be provided by the Union will also have an impact on the political sphere in time. As neither can political formations function without economic interests, nor can economic formations function without political interests.

5. CONCLUSION

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) represents one of the most significant regional integration efforts in the post-Cold War geographical space of the former Soviet Union. This study has explored the key motivations, challenges and implications of the EAEU, revealing a complex interplay of economic, political and geopolitical factors influencing its development and future trajectory. While the Union has made remarkable progress in promoting economic cooperation among its member states, it continues to face critical structural, institutional and geopolitical hurdles that affect its long-term sustainability and effectiveness.

One of the key findings of this analysis is that the EAEU is driven by both economic and strategic considerations. Economically, member states seek to improve trade flows, investment opportunities and regional stability through a single market. The reduction of trade barriers, the harmonisation of economic policies and the development of common regulatory frameworks have facilitated intra-regional trade, allowing smaller economies to access the larger Russian market. In addition, the promise of increased connectivity through transport and infrastructure projects, including the integration of supply chains and energy networks, has strengthened the economic rationale of the EAEU. However, despite these economic incentives, significant disparities in economic development among member states have challenged the effectiveness and cohesion of the Union. Russia's dominance in the decision-making process has led to concerns about economic asymmetry and national sovereignty, sometimes causing friction among member states and undermining the Union's collective decision-making processes.

From a geopolitical perspective, the EAEU serves as an instrument for Russia to consolidate its influence in its near abroad and to counterbalance Western economic and political integration projects such as the European Union. The Union is often perceived as a means for Russia to maintain regional hegemony and prevent the drift of former Soviet republics towards Western alliances. While some member states see participation in the EAEU as a way to secure economic growth and stability through closer cooperation with Russia, others remain wary of excessive dependence on Moscow. The challenges posed by external factors such as Western sanctions against Russia, economic downturns and the evolving geopolitical landscape have further complicated the EAEU's ability to function as a cohesive economic bloc. The rise of China as a major economic partner in the region, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative, has also created new dynamics that could either complement or undermine the EAEU's objectives, depending on how the relationship evolves.

Another key finding is that institutional and structural constraints have prevented the full realisation of the EAEU's potential. Although the Union has made progress in customs regulation and economic coordination, political divergences and inconsistent policy implementation continue to limit deeper integration. The lack of a strong supranational authority has made it difficult to enforce compliance with Union rules, leading to uneven implementation across member states. Moreover, the prevalence of bilateral agreements outside the EAEU framework has weakened the Union's effectiveness as a unified entity, as individual member states prioritise national interests over collective regional goals. Moreover, internal disputes, such as trade disputes and protectionist policies, have further highlighted the challenges of creating a truly integrated economic space.

In conclusion, while the Eurasian Economic Union represents a significant attempt at regional integration in the post-Soviet space, its long-term success depends on addressing economic imbalances, improving institutional efficiency and fostering greater political cohesion among member states. The EAEU's ability to evolve into a more effective and sustainable economic union will ultimately depend on its ability to balance national interests with regional cooperation and to navigate the broader geopolitical landscape of Eurasia. Without a stronger institutional framework and a commitment to more inclusive decision-making processes, the EAEU may struggle to realise its full potential as a robust and competitive regional economic bloc. Going forward, the EAEU's adaptability

in responding to internal and external challenges will be a determining factor in its longevity and overall impact on regional economic integration.

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