Kazakhstan and the Eurasian integration:
Russian predominance, identity politics and ancient myths

The concept of “evrazijstvo”, Eurasianism, was born in the Twenties within the Russian diaspora in Europe, after the Revolution in 1917. A group of Russian young intellectuals theorized a new geopolitical doctrine, ideologically distancing themself from the predominant anti-revolutionary feeling of their compatriots abroad.

The founding fathers of Eurasianism were: the linguist Nikolay S. Trubecskoy, descending from an important noble family of princes; the geographer Pëtr N. Savicky, the theologian Georgy V. Florovsky, who later left the Eurasianist movement; the musicologist Pëtr P. Suvchinsky and the legal scholar Nicolai N. Alekseev Savitzky, who suggested the use of the world azijskij to form the neologism evrazijskij.

Eurasianism did not condemn Bolshevism, but considered it an inevitable consequence of the modernization of the Russian Empire with its contradictions and social inequalities. However, the dissolution of the Russian empire, following the October Revolution, was for the Eurasianists an unnatural historical process.

They looked at Russia, like Byzantium, as an amalgam of European and Asian elements, where the “Slavic culture” had to be considered as a myth. Direct successors of the Slavophiles, the Eurasianists took as inspiration the concept of “samobytnost” and criticized Western values such as democracy and capitalism. They wanted a form of ideocracy for their Euroasiatic “Russia”, considered as a third continent between Europe and Asia and not more as a divided State between them.

They symbolically erased the conventional border of the Ural, a sort of instrument for the division between motherland and colonies, between Evropejskaja deržava, as Catherine the Great used to call European Russia, and colonized Asia.

Based on the observations of a “dying West” and a “rising East”, Eurasianism had an unexpected revival in the Eighties, until it got a large “patriotic” consensus in the second half of the Nineties, trying to give Russia once again a major role in the neighborhood policy in Central Asia.

In the spring of 1994, Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev was on official visit in the countries of Central Asian, demanding dual citizenship for the Russian-speaking minorities. The opinion leaders of the cosmopolitan intellectuals in the Kazakhstani parliament start a campaign for a confederate union with Russia. Nurbulat Masanov, one of the leaders of the broad alliance
of opposition forces in Kazakhstan, coined a motto for the campaign: ‘Kazakhstan ne imeyet budutshego bez Rossii’.

Afraid of losing the still unstable independence of his country, the - at that time - newly elected President Nursultan Nazarbayev became himself a supporter of the Eurasianist orientation, trying to balance the poly-ethnic nature of the republic with a strong ethno-nationalism.

He proposed the formation of a Eurasian Union right in April 1994, when the Russian foreign minister arrived at Almaty, trying later on to maintain a close cooperation with Russia and, at the same time, to soft balance against Russia’s influence through an active collaboration with other CIS countries.

Landlocked between Russia and China, Kazakhstan had to face the new geopolitical balance after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with all the positive and negative aspects of globalization.

The Eurasian Union seemed to be for Nursultan Nazarbayev a solution for the centrifugal implications of the political reinforcement of the different ethnic groups, especially the Russophile ones.

However, this process has advanced very slowly: the Treaty on Mutual Trade Area was signed in Saint Petersburg only on October 18, 2011, but since last year, the Eurasian Economic Union has been in effect.

Throughout a Sino-Russian consensus in Eurasia, the economic and political cooperation in Central Asia is developing on three main trajectories: the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), Central Asia and the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB).

Now a day, in Kazakhstan, the concept of Eurasianism has turned into a State ideology, which influences domestic, regional, foreign policies, as well as regional integration processes.

Different from the contemporary Russian Pan-Eurasianism, from the Turkish Eurasianism and from the “Muslim” Eurasianism, the one proclaimed by Nursultan Nazarbayev is an important factor in planning and determining Kazakhstan’s foreign policy goals, in the attempt to play the role of a “bridge between Asia and Europe”.