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Russian policy toward the Eurasian region during the early 90s of the 20th century

Abstract. *The article examines the influence of the Soviet Union's collapse on the early forms of cooperation and integration in the post-Soviet space. The author also focused on major attitudes and models of cooperation between the Russian Federation and former Soviet republics, which were elaborated on within Yeltsin's administration. Among other things, the author outlines some key factors that posed serious obstacles to successful integration in the post-Soviet space and their negative impact on picking up the correct forms and models of interaction between former Soviet republics. For many of the former Soviet republics, the process of foreign policy adaptation to new forms of cooperation is still taking place. The tragic processes that we are witnessing today in relations between Russia and Ukraine, not least, have their roots in the early 90s. This indicates that the period of comprehension of the history of the formation of the renewed Eurasian space after the collapse of the USSR is not over yet and needs close attention from researchers.*

Keywords: *Collapse of the USSR, Boris Yeltsin, integration, Russian foreign policy, CIS, post-Soviet space.*

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Introduction

The collapse of the USSR and the formation of newly independent states was a turning point not only in the recent history of the entire Eurasian region but also for many years became a source for the search for new ways and strategies of interaction between the former republics of the unified state. This was a very complicated process, the states were forced to face a number of domestic and foreign policy difficulties, and

crises, determine their strategic priorities in the new conditions, as well as find an acceptable model of cooperation with their neighbors in the region.

It is true, that the basic principles and foundations of the modern pattern of interaction between newly independent states were forming in the very complex conditions of the collapse of the USSR. Ethno-territorial conflicts arose and grew on the territory of the former Union, difficulties of the transitional economy and

some painful market reforms appeared, and the crisis of the administrative-command way of management and social security model. In this paper, we will try to characterize the main and general features of the formation of the Russian approach to interaction with the former republics of the USSR at the very initial stage of their formation, when the Russian statehood has just begun the process of its construction.

The process of Soviet collapse, which gradually gained strength in the late 80s of the XX century, has become not a new phenomenon in Russian history. It is worth remembering both the Caucasian War and the Polish uprisings of 1830 and 1863-64 in the Russian Empire. These processes became especially visible during the revolution of 1917 and the collapse of the Russian Empire. As one of the clearest examples of this, we can see the desire of Ukraine to gain independence in 1917-1918 by creating an independent Ukrainian People's Republic¹. As well as the recognition by the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR of Finland's independence in 1917. In this series, we can also note the Basmati movement on the territory of the countries of Central Asia, which is also considered by many historians as a national liberation movement². In other words, during the period of weakening of the government power in Russia, centrifugal processes traditionally intensified and the growth of the nationalistic movements started to be kind of mainstream. Contradictions between the center and the national republics that had been accumulating

for a long time gradually became a dominant theme in their relations. In the USSR, these contradictions also had a deep historical nature and were acutely manifested during the period of weakening of the state.

It is obvious that the process of the collapse of the USSR began with the conflict between national elites for control over the national republics. The main idea of the Republican elites was to strengthen their independence from the Union's Center. Therefore, it seems quite natural that after gaining independence, none of them wanted to return to relations that in one form or another gave Moscow advantages in decision-making³. At the same time, few people had a clear idea of the form of relationships that would have to be built between former Soviet Republics in the conditions of a huge economic, military, and political imbalance between them. In addition, it should be noted that centrifugal tendencies in some regions did not receive adequate support, and in some republics, these trends were perceived as rather marginal.

Research methods

According to Boris Yeltsin, the liquidation of the USSR was the transition of Russian civilization from an imperial form of existence to a non-imperial, modern, and democratic one. He was convinced that a huge bureaucratic machine was not needed to maintain Russia's control over the post-Soviet space, since the economic ties that had developed over the years were a guarantee of its unity. On the contrary, Yeltsin believed that the new democratic Russia would become a more effective and attractive state, both for the «near» and «far» abroad. Thus, the aspirations of the Russian leadership of reformers in creating new forms of relations with newly independent states were to preserve the geopolitical integrity of the post-Soviet states, stop centrifugal tendencies

³ Barsenkov A.S. Evolution of Russia's policy towards the CIS in the context of the conditions of the emergence of the Commonwealth / 20 years of the CIS: state and prospects. Materials of the International scientific and practical conference (Moscow, December 12, 2011). Moscow: Institute of Diaspora and Integration (Institute of CIS Countries), 2012

¹ See: Materials of the international conference «Ukraine and Russia: History and the image of history» Moscow, April 3-5, 2008. Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Center of Ukrainian and Belarusistics Studies of the Faculty of History of the Moscow State University Institute of Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences [Electronic resource] URL: <http://www.hist.msu.ru/Labs/UkrBel/nowozytnosc.htm> (Accessed 12.01.2023) internet source

² Makhmudov O.A., Pugovkina O.G. The history of armed resistance to Soviet power in the Turkestan ASSR – Uzbek SSR: approaches and assessments of modern historiography of Uzbekistan (late 1990s - early 2020s) / The Civil War in Russia: problems of exit, historical consequences, lessons for modernity: a collection of scientific papers / ed. V.M.Rynkov, Institute of History SB RAS. – Novosibirsk: Parallel, 2022. C. 317-342. URL: <http://confs.iisoran.ru/data/CW2022/978-5-98901-255-8.pdf#page=317> (accessed 22.01.2023) article in the collection

and stimulate the treaty process [8]. The unity of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine on the issue of the future of the CIS should have served as a signal for other countries to follow their example and move relations into a new, constructive direction.

Discussion

In September-October 1991, two documents were developed and adopted that defined the development of Russia in the first half of the 1990s: «Russia's Strategy in the transition period», and «Russia's Immediate Economic Prospects». These documents have become the conceptual design of the Russian foreign policy strategy for 1991-1995⁴.

The strategy of Russia in the transition period was compiled by a group of Democrats led by G. Burbulis, a close associate of Boris Yeltsin. The ideas set out in this document became the basis of Russian domestic and foreign policy during the transition period. In contrast to the «cautious» scenarios of the development of the Russian state that existed at that time, providing for the preservation of its membership in the modified USSR. Indeed, in the period from April to July 1991, several drafts of a new Union Treaty were seriously discussed at different levels in the USSR, which in different versions was proposed as the Union of Soviet Sovereign Republics (Union of SSR) or the Union of Sovereign States (SSG), where the republics were offered significantly broader powers and independence than it was before. [12, pp. 707-745].

Nevertheless, according to Burbulis and his team of like-minded people, the main goal of Russia was to be the complete elimination and dismantling of the USSR in any form. He believed that after the August coup, the continued existence of the Union became impossible. The contradictions between its non-equilibrium subjects have become insurmountable⁵.

⁴ Yeltsin B.N. Notes of the President. M.: Russian Political Encyclopedia, 2008. pp. 64-65

⁵ Burbulis G. «Free Speech» Club, meeting on February 17, 1995: «How is Russia better than the USSR: is it possible to deceive history?», Verbatim report, pp.7-13. URL: https://www.gorby.ru/userfiles/file/iz_vospominaniy_gburb.pdf (Accessed 20.01.2023) internet source

The most important task of Russian foreign policy during the transition period was the need to take the place of the USSR in the international arena. To do this, it was proposed to declare the RSFSR the legal successor of all obligations, including debts. The other republics of the USSR were too weak in economic terms and were not ready to take on serious financial obligations. Thus, the RSFSR firmly and almost painlessly established itself in the international arena as an independent state with extensive external relations. The main vector of the foreign policy course was supposed to be a pro-Western orientation [8].

The strategy clearly stated that Russia is ready to withdraw from the jurisdiction of the common center and pursue an independent policy. Concerning the other republics of the USSR, in this context, great skepticism was expressed. The document noted that they are not yet ready for independent existence, so Russia should take the place of the USSR on the scale of the near abroad, but do it carefully, without causing panic in the post-Soviet republics. At the same time, it was stipulated that she had all the necessary levers to become a leader. The RSFSR retained control over the allied power structures, in addition, it was a key supplier of energy resources. It was assumed that the RSFSR would become the leader of the post-Soviet states due to natural causes, and the former Soviet republics would have no other way but to follow in the wake of Russia [8].

The idea of a new form of integration in the post-Soviet space was really attractive to most representatives of the Russian elite of that time. Some saw in this process the hope of recreating a single state in a new political framework and conditions, while others could use it to distract a significant number of the electorate from the most complex block of internal and external problems⁶.

According to some researchers, at the time of the collapse of the USSR, there were two main projects for the future of Russia. Supporters of the

⁶ Moroz O. Russia is going to rush forward // Yeltsin Center. [electronic resource] - 2013 URL: <http://www.yeltsincenter.ru/rossiya-sobiraetsya-rvanutsya-vpered#bottom> (accessed 12.01.2023) internet source

first, institutional, insisted on the need to change ideological guidelines, transform elements of the political culture of the population and integrate into Western civilization. Adherents of the second approach, however, believed that «traditional», or, as they would say now, «Eurasian» values and life guidelines could become prerequisites for the formation of a new form of joint state existence [1]. The first point of view prevailed in the first stage.

Nevertheless, on August 26, 1991, Boris Yeltsin's press secretary made a statement that in case of the termination of the Union treaty, the RSFSR reserves the right to deal with the problem of «revision of borders» in the post-Soviet space. Shortly before the coup, Boris Yeltsin took the initiative that «from this moment, energy prices will be determined not by the Union Center, but by Russia» [1. p. 87]. Subsequently, the prices of Russian energy resources will be used as a tool in Russia's foreign policy towards the former Soviet republics, which meant that all the articulated guidelines of Yeltsin and his team to move away from «imperialism» and build new democratic principles of equal interaction with the former republics of the USSR, they actually remained largely declarative. In matters of political interaction and economic ties, Moscow saw itself as an arbitrator and regulator [10. p. 535]. Following this logic, already in 1991, Russia saw for itself a special exclusive role in the context of new relations being built in Eurasia, which for decades to come determined the key vector of foreign policy strategy in the post-Soviet space.

Russia has set a course for the soonest creation of an independent state. The successful implementation of this plan would consolidate its leadership in the post-Soviet space. The document «Immediate Economic Prospects», developed by a group of economists led by E. T. Gaidar, spelled out what kind of economic policy should be pursued for this. Gaidar's supporters advocated immediate and radical transformations: price liberalization, privatization of property, and macroeconomic stabilization. The Gaidar's team believed that Russia needed to make a strong and fast market breakthrough and transform the old Soviet horizontal and vertical economic ties

with the former republics of the USSR. As Egor Gaidar noted, speaking about relations with the Soviet republics, Russia should strive to «achieve economic independence as soon as possible while maintaining a political union with them for a transitional period» [6].

Gaidar's project had many opponents. Some politicians and statesmen, for example, G. Zyuganov, N. Ryzhkov, E. Ligachev, in principle, were against radical market transformations and proposed to modernize the old economic system, in accordance with the principles of the Andropov reforms of 1982-1983. Another part, including L. Abalkin, Yr. Yaremenko, S. Shatalin, S. Glazyev, Yu. Luzhkov, Yu. Skokov, advocated a more moderate pace of reforms and the preservation of a greater role of the state in economic management. However, unlike Gaidar's group, the opponents of the reforms could not provide an effective reform project that meets the requirements of the time, so there was no real alternative to Gaidar's transformations [7].

Thus, despite Boris Yeltsin's declared departure from Soviet practices of interaction with neighboring states and condemnation of Soviet «imperialism», the main idea of the Russian strategy of interaction with the republics of the former USSR during the transition period was to maintain a certain control over independent Russia and relatively exclusive influence on the post-Soviet republics. At the same time, in our opinion, a number of miscalculations were made in it.

Its main miscalculation turned out to be insufficient consideration of the factor of a relatively rapid transition to the construction of nation-states in which political forces striving for a multi-vector foreign policy and did not want a unilateral dependence on Russia. In addition, there was a certain underestimation of the international conjuncture within which this entire cooperative construction was carried out. If it was advantageous for Russia to maintain a single space, then a significant part of the newly independent countries, on the contrary, sought to limit it. The highest value for them

was sovereignty and independence in decision-making. This idea was widely supported in Europe and the United States, for which it was important both to preserve the stability of the post-Soviet space and to prevent the rapid strengthening of Russia and the revival of the USSR in any form. Therefore, Western politicians could only accept Russia's limited influence in the post-Soviet space and were extremely wary of its integration initiatives [3].

However, according to the Russian leadership in 1991-1994, the fact of the liquidation of the USSR was to ensure a stable place for the new Russia in the Western world and close economic ties with the countries of the former USSR accumulated over the years of living together. This was expected as a basis to ensure the sustainable development of integration in the post-Soviet space. For this reason, Russian policy in the post-Soviet space was initially characterized by a certain dichotomy, which combined a departure from the Soviet past, but the same time preserving some of its narratives and practices with the former Soviet republics. It was this dichotomy that for a long time prevented the formation of effective cooperation formats in the 90s and even entered the XXI century.

Results

The main range of problems that have been solved with varying degrees of effectiveness within the CIS is the problems of ensuring the peaceful dismantling of the USSR and eliminating the negative consequences of this process, in particular conflict resolution. In addition, at the first stage, Russia paid much more attention to expanding its partnership with the United States and Western European countries. [6, pp. 40-45]. Paying attention to this important aspect, it can be stated that the formation of the Russian Federation after the collapse of the USSR took place within the framework of the then-emerging the USA-centric or unipolar world⁷. Although, of course, the preservation of previously

⁷ See: The concept of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation 1993

accumulated ties with neighboring republics was also given quite a lot of importance. And yet, despite all the efforts of various political forces in different republics of the former USSR, early attempts to launch effective forms of integration were not entirely successful for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the need to expand economic cooperation and strengthen horizontal ties with the neighboring states starts when domestic economic development opportunities have been fully utilized, as well as many key problems in the organization of the internal economic space have been solved, which objectively did not correspond to the reality of early 90s. This is why the early attempts to establish some forms of Customs Union and multilateral trade agreements were unsuccessful.

Secondly, the transfer of part of economic sovereignty to supranational governance structures can occur when it gives some noticeable economic advantages over the preservation of sovereignty. Integration pursues as a positive goal only when it gives an additional impetus to the positive development of the economy of states. But it usually cannot solve the domestic problems at the very initial stage of the formation of the national economy. Economic integration as a form of international relations can be effective only if there are established sustainable national economies and effective national management systems.

Thirdly, it is a widespread belief that the economic ties between republics in the USSR could have played a greater role in keeping the economies of newly independent states strongly interdependent. In fact, in a transitional economy when all the soviet models were gone, all the previous connections usually does not work any longer. In addition, the USSR's technological complexes and districts were often created without strict consideration of local peculiarities and economic advantages and could not be efficient within new realities.[11]. But most importantly, it was difficult to preserve the old technological chains in the conditions of radical market reforms. Hence, Gaidar's team

calculations were based on false expectations of a trajectory of the transitional period.

Conclusion

The main economic problem of the CIS was the unformed economies of the member countries and their unwillingness to an interstate division of labor. CIS members regularly deviated from a single policy and, formally agreeing with the general rules of the game, making decisions that fundamentally contradict them. For example, the introduction of strict protectionist measures, restrictions on exports and imports, etc. Not least, the responsibility for quick disintegration to a greater degree associated with Yeltsin's group which picked up a certain strategy that

could not help searching the most efficient ways of economic cooperation.

These problems in the economy were complemented by acute political disagreements. The construction of nation-states, as we know, caused a surge of nationalism and sharp criticism of the USSR and Russia. The weak conceptual elaboration of the CIS idea led to different interpretations of the principles of interaction within its framework.

Thus, the first attempts to develop a model of effective interaction in the space of the former USSR encountered a number of serious contradictions of an economic and political nature, which required further correction throughout the second half of the nineties of the XX century.

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Политика России на Евразийском пространстве в начале 90-х годов XX века

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается влияние распада Советского Союза на ранние формы сотрудничества и интеграции на постсоветском пространстве. Автор также сосредоточился на основных условиях и моделях сотрудничества между Российской Федерацией и бывшими советскими республиками, которые были разработаны в администрации Ельцина. Среди прочего, автор выделяет некоторые ключевые факторы, которые создавали серьезные препятствия для успешной интеграции на постсоветском пространстве, и их негативное влияние на выбор правильных форм и моделей взаимодействия между бывшими советскими республиками. Для многих бывших советских республик процесс адаптации внешней политики к новым формам сотрудничества все еще продолжается. Трагические процессы, которые мы наблюдаем сегодня в отношениях между Россией и Украиной, не в последнюю очередь уходят своими корнями в начало 90-х годов. Это свидетельствует о том, что период осмысления истории формирования обновленного евразийского пространства после распада СССР еще не закончен и нуждается в пристальном внимании исследователей.

Ключевые слова: Распад СССР, Б. Н. Ельцин, интеграция, внешняя политика России, СНГ, постсоветское пространство.

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Ресейдің XX ғасырдың 90-жылдарының басында Еуразиялық кеңістіктегі саясаты

Аңдатпа. Мақалада Кеңес Одағының ыдырауының посткеңестік кеңістіктегі ынтымақтастық пен интеграцияның алғашқы түрлеріне әсері қарастырылады. Автор сонымен қатар Ельцин әкімшілігінде дамыған Ресей Федерациясы мен бұрынғы кеңестік республикалар арасындағы ынтымақтастықтың негізгі көзқарастары мен модельдеріне назар аударды. Басқа нәрселермен қатар, автор посткеңестік кеңістікте сәтті интеграцияға елеулі кедергілер тудырған кейбір негізгі факторларды және олардың бұрынғы кеңестік республикалар арасындағы өзара әрекеттесудің дұрыс формалары мен үлгілерін таңдауға теріс әсерін атап көрсетеді. Көптеген бұрынғы кеңестік республикалар үшін сыртқы саясатты ынтымақтастықтың жаңа түрлеріне бейімдеу процесі әлі де жалғасуда. Біз бүгін Ресей мен Украина арасындағы қарым-қатынаста көріп отырған қайғылы процестер 90-шы жылдардың басында тамыры бар. Бұл КСРО ыдырағаннан кейін жаңартылған Еуразиялық кеңістіктің қалыптасу тарихын түсіну кезеңі әлі аяқталмағанын және зерттеушілердің назарын қажет ететіндігін көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: КСРО-ның ыдырауы, Борис Ельцин, интеграция, Ресейдің сыртқы саясаты, ТМД, посткеңестік кеңістік.

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