



THE POLITICS OF EURASIA YESTERDAY AND TODAY ПОЛИТИКА ЕВРАЗИИ ВЧЕРА И СЕГОДНЯ

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Political Processes on the Eurasian Continent: Prehistory and Modern Times

Irlan Zh. Iskakov

*University under the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of EurAsEC, Saint Petersburg,
Russian Federation*

✉ iiel2002@mail.ru

Abstract. These days, there is a special emphasis on the geopolitical shifts in the Eurasian zone, which are directly tied to the advancement of the Eurasian integration process. The study's focus was on the political dynamics of Eurasia, particularly the challenges associated with the emergence of a multipolar global order. It was deemed important to explore them by drawing comparisons between the experience of Russia's eastward progress and the contemporary political and economic developments. Scientific works on the evolution of relationships between the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation, and the people living in the Great Steppe, as well as new state organizations that emerged following the fall of the USSR, are incorporated into the work by both domestic and foreign authors. The analysis makes use of transdisciplinary approaches, historical and comparative analyses, and other general scientific methods. The study's findings were presented in scientific conferences held at the Eurasian Scientific Forum in St. Petersburg, Russia, and other Eurasian countries. Based on the historicist tenet, the analysis allowed for the demonstration of how historical political processes and events shaped contemporary political actors' foreign policies and attitudes toward Russia in the Middle Asian region. Attention is called to the aspects of developing Russophobia emotions among the new political elites, which substantially complicates interstate ties on the continent. Clarification of certain terms (e.g., "Central Asia") that are utilized in the current political science terminology is given careful consideration.

Keywords: Eurasia, political processes, Russia, Great Steppe, Eurasian integration, prehistory, modern times

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Политические процессы на Евразийском континенте: предыстория и современность

И.Ж. Искаков 

Университет при Межпарламентской Ассамблее ЕвразЭС, Санкт-Петербург,
Российская Федерация

✉ iiel2002@mail.ru

Аннотация. В настоящее время особую важность приобретают вопросы геополитических изменений на евразийском пространстве, тесно связанных с дальнейшим развитием процесса евразийской интеграции. Объектом изучения явились политические процессы в Евразии, в том числе проблемы формирования многополярного мира. Для этого необходимо провести сопоставление опыта продвижения России на восток континента и текущих политико-экономических событий. В работе использованы научные работы отечественных и зарубежных авторов по вопросам развития взаимоотношений между Российской империей, Советским Союзом, Российской Федерацией и обитателями Великой Степи, а также новыми государственными образованиями, появившимися после развала СССР. Для анализа применены исторический, сравнительно-аналитический, трансдисциплинарный подходы и другие общенаучные методы. Результаты исследования обсуждались на научных конференциях в странах Евразии, на Евразийском научном форуме в Санкт-Петербурге. Проведенный анализ позволил на основании принципа историзма показать влияние политических процессов и событий прошлого на внешнюю политику современных политических акторов в Среднеазиатском регионе и их позицию в отношении России. Уделено внимание факторам усиления русофобских настроений в среде новых политических элит, что серьезно осложняет межгосударственные отношения на континенте, а также уточнению некоторых понятий (например, «Центральная Азия»), применяемым в современном политологическом лексиконе. Представленные материалы и выводы будут способствовать объективации текущих исследований и экспертных оценок политических процессов, политических акторов, изменений политических реалий в Среднеазиатском регионе, а также развитию межгосударственных, межэтнических и межконфессиональных отношений в регионе.

Ключевые слова: Евразия, политические процессы, Россия, Великая Степь, евразийская интеграция, предыстория, современность

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Introduction

Throughout the history of mankind, Eurasia has been regarded as the cradle of global civilization. Its land saw the manifestation of tragic human outcomes that are still significant today. Here, empires were established, extensive trade routes connected the continent's north and south, the east and west, and the cultural achievements of the Eurasian peoples were exchanged.

Today, Eurasia provides a socio-historical environment for the formation of a multipolar world, in which the most important actors are India, China, Russia, and Turkey. It is still vital to consider the impact of the United States, Great Britain, and other major EU members. The history of their relations is of considerable interest, which largely determines the current positions of the political elites of these centers of power. The former Soviet republics of Middle Asia, participating in regional integration processes, are also striving to join them.¹ It is the Asian part of the continent that is currently strengthening its positions, which motivates the in-depth study of the political history of the region. Researchers and practitioners encounter a variety of challenges and roadblocks along this route. Among these is the political lexicon's underdevelopment, which includes the imprecision of the phrases still in use today. The word "Middle Asia," which had been used in European research, was said to be out of date and needed to be replaced with a more contemporary one after the USSR fell apart. This was done to support the emerging Eurasian governments' inclination to disassociate themselves from Russia. To them, the idea of "Central Asia" constituted such. It is "capacious for the geographical definition of the region," according to a number of Russian scholars [Bekmakhanova 2015: 13]. By bringing this expression into the political terminology, they committed themselves to deepening the divide between the Russian Federation and the emerging Eurasian states, bolstering the nationalist ambitions of Western-oriented political elites, and impeding the advancement of the regional integration process.

Prominent scientists (such as A.S. Panarin, L.S. Vasiliev, and A.D. Voskresensky) have long since concluded that applying Western political scientists' findings to analyze Eastern socio-state structures is not heuristic because the techniques and conclusions developed for Western nations do not allow for the identification of patterns and details of Eastern societies' evolutionary history. We shall now address the evolution of political events and processes in the area under consideration, which have over time vanished or were purposefully excluded from the scope of experts in the fields of economics, finance, culture, anthropology, politics, etc. There were both integration and disintegration-related events in various historical periods. To give two contemporary examples, the USSR disintegrated in 1991 and the Maastricht Treaty text was agreed upon in 1992. As a consequence, the socialist empire fell, but a new imperial project—the European Union—arose, in the words of S.Yu. Glazyev. India and Pakistan joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2016, while Great Britain withdrew from the EU.

The existence of the Soviet Union brought about particularly serious changes in the Eurasian political landscape. In the 1920s, national states of Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks and other inhabitants of Middle Asia were formed within the USSR, and in the 1990s, the former Soviet republics declared their sovereignty.² Initially, the new state

¹ In 2024, the Treaty on the EAEU will celebrate its 10th anniversary, as a result of which the work will focus on the states of the East and the "heart" of Eurasia.

² This article compares political processes of different periods in the Asian part of the continent; the positions of the Baltic and Transcaucasian countries will not be characterized.

formations saw their main tasks in: 1) solving the problems of independent economic development, and 2) acquiring political weight on the world stage as a sovereign political actor. At that time, most of the former Soviet republics believed that the main direction of their foreign policy was distancing themselves from Russia and focusing on Western European nations and the United States, while simultaneously recognizing the impossibility of completely breaking the political, economic and cultural ties that had developed over the past centuries within the framework of various state associations.

The formation of new integration alliances began, primarily the CIS (1991). Quite soon, member states began to criticize the Commonwealth for its inability to effectively develop economic cooperation. On the initiative of N.A. Nazarbayev (1994), Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan created the Eurasian Economic Union (2000). Belarus and Kazakhstan applied it to realize the competitive advantages of their economies and more successfully integrate into international economic life. Later, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, due to joining the EAEU, strengthened their sovereignty in interstate relations with large countries of the continent and the United States. In 2017, academician S.Yu. Glazyev emphasized: “We are combining only those economic regulation functions that are expected to bring common benefits due to a larger scale of production, cooperation, and a combination of competitive advantages.”³ This process was defined as the “rise of Greater Eurasia.”⁴

Integration manifestations attracted the attention of Western politicians and political scientists. H. Clinton literally immediately declared Eurasian integration “a Russian project to restore the USSR.” Swedish expert A. Åslund emphasized the economic failure of Eurasian economic associations, calling the integration processes in the post-Soviet space a “neo-imperialist movement.”⁵ H. Clinton’s statement was to some extent based on the attitude of young Eurasian states to sovereignty as a “sacred concept.”⁶ Such an assessment of national independence determined the desire of the former Soviet republics of the region to limit themselves to the development of economic integration.

Professor D.G. Evstafiev, analyzing political changes in Eurasia, wrote about the “final untabooing of the topic of spatial transformations in the post-Soviet space.” In his opinion, “it is becoming increasingly difficult to talk only about Eurasia. Political and especially geopolitical processes occurring around it are inevitably affected. Eurasia is ceasing to be a valuable and systemically self-

³ Glazyev, S. *Organicity of Eurasianism*. Retrieved August 19, 2017, <https://svop.ru/main/22496/>

⁴ Efremenko, D. *The Birth of Greater Eurasia*. Retrieved July 4, 2024, from <https://svop.ru/main/22210/>

⁵ Åslund, Anders. (June 20, 2012). Putin's Eurasian Illusion Will Lead to Isolation. *Moscow Times*. June 20, 2012. Retrieved July 17, 2023, from <https://www.piiie.com/commentary/op-eds/putins-eurasian-illusion-will-lead-isolation>

⁶ Bordachev, T. *In Spite of All the Devils: Contrary to Skeptics' Forecasts, Eurasian Integration Continues to Develop*. Retrieved April 7, 2024, from: <https://svop.ru/main/28156>

sufficient space, including due to Russia's restructuring of economic ties in order to make them more stable"⁷.

To study the problem of interstate relations, various materials were used: interstate documents, domestic and foreign studies, memoirs, notes of travelers, members of expeditionary detachments, representatives of the imperial administration, etc. In the process of obtaining correct scientific conclusions, historical, comparative-analytical, transdisciplinary, systemic, structural-functional and complex approaches were used.

The Eurasian Continent as an Arena for Geopolitical Projects

For many centuries, Middle Asia has been a sphere of interest for both Western and Eastern countries of the continent. Over time, the United States joined the interested parties. Iranian researcher Aliasgar Sherdust explains the geopolitics and geostrategy of this region by the following factors: the presence of significant oil and gas reserves, the location of transit and communication routes, the strategic and geoeconomic importance of the Caspian Sea, control over resource extraction processes and energy routes passing through the region, the ability to influence internal crises, as well as the presence of common cultural, historical and economic interests between Central Asian and neighboring countries in modern conditions. He believes that they served as the main factor in increasing the competition of regional and transregional forces claiming a key role in Central Asia after the collapse of the USSR.⁸ It is also important that the region is the only point in the world where four nuclear powers are located (Russia, China, India, Pakistan). Today, the united West views Eurasia as a territory of confrontation with Russia and China. In addition to the Middle Asian states, five regional (Russia, Iran, Turkey, India and Pakistan) and three transregional (USA, EU and China) powers are fighting to satisfy their interests here. In his work "Global Political Forecasting" A.S. Panarin noted that "the Eurasian continent is the solid earth of the world, a refuge for everything real and provided with cash, in contrast to the oceanic abysses that have given birth to a virtual economy and other virtual pseudo-realities" [Panarin 2000: 121].

A significant role in the region belongs to China, which historically had relations with the Bukhara Emirate, the Kokand and Khiva Khanates, and other Turkic state entities in the center of the continent. The great trade routes (Silk and Tea) are still preserved in the memory of mankind. The special place of Middle Asia in China's modern foreign policy is due to the presence of huge oil and gas reserves in the Caspian region, the fact that these territories form an untouched large-scale market

⁷ Evstafiev, D. *Reunification Day: How the North-Eastern Front changed the geopolitical alignments in the Eurasian space September 29, 2023*. Retrieved July 4, 2024, from <https://eurasia.expert/den-vossoedineniya-kak-svo-izmenila-geopoliticheskie-rasklady-na-prostranstve-evrazii/>

⁸ Sherdust, A. *Characteristics of Central Asia in Geopolitical Theories and the Role of Conflicts*. Retrieved June 12, 2017, from <https://www.geopolitika.ru/article/harakteristika-centralnoy-azii-v-geopoliticheskikh-teoriyah-i-rol-konfliktov>

consuming Chinese-made goods, and the successful investment policy of the PRC in relation to new and old states.⁹ The PRC leadership actively applies the experience of building foreign policy relations with old states to justify and legitimize its modern geopolitical projects.

With the start of the Special Military Operation for Denazification and Demilitarization of Ukraine (SMO) and the collapse of the unipolar world, the importance of Eurasia for world politics and economics has increased many times over. Tajik political scientist H.J. Rustamov sees Russia, China and the United States as the main actors here.¹⁰ Russia has proposed the Greater Eurasian Partnership project; and China has proposed the “One Belt, One Road” initiative (Silk Road Economic Belt). The United States proposes turning the center of the continent into Greater Central Asia, adding Afghanistan, northwestern India, part of Pakistan, Iran and Chinese Xinjiang to the territories traditionally included in this concept. Turkey is predicting the “Great Turan” project for Middle Asia, which a number of experts assess as a desire to form a network Turkic state (“New Horde”), which would also include some parts of the Russian Federation: Bashkiria and Tatarstan (and, in the future, Yakutia and the Volga region).

Yu. Kharlamova characterizes the political role of Russia in Eurasia as the holder of the balance between the east and west of the continent, as an integrator state.¹¹ In connection with the introduction into the modern scientific terminology of the concept of a “civilization-state,” corresponding to the complex stage of transition from a unipolar to a multipolar system, we recall the opinion of I.A. Ilyin about Russia: “Russia is not a random accumulation of territories and tribes and not an artificially created “mechanism” of “regions,” but a living, historically grown and culturally justified organism, not subject to arbitrary dismemberment. This organism is a geographical unity, the parts of which are connected by economic mutual nutrition; this organism is a spiritual, linguistic and cultural unity, which has historically linked the Russian people with their nationally younger brothers by spiritual mutual understanding; it is a state and strategic unity that has proven to the world its will and its ability to defend itself, it is a real stronghold of European-Asian, and therefore universal peace and balance” [Ilyin 1992: 3].

Western countries retain their main goal of separating the peoples of the Eurasian core from Russia and China. The objective deterioration in the standard and quality of life of citizens of the new Eurasian states was compensated for by nationalist mythology about the “consequences of the Soviet occupation,” “exploitation of the republics by Moscow,” “centuries-long oppression by the Empire,” and the dissemination of similar images [Glazyev 2018: 3]. Such mythological theses corresponded to the

⁹ For relations with Russia, see below.

¹⁰ Rustamov, H.J. *Prospects for Cooperation between Russia and Central Asia in the Context of the New World Order*. Retrieved April 17, 2024, from <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/perspektivy-sotrudnichestva-rossii-i-tsentralnoy-azii/?ysclid=lv3pyvnax3153937450>

¹¹ Kharlamova, Yu. *The peoples of the world need a safe Eurasia*. Retrieved July 20, 2018, from https://ruskline.ru/analitika/2017/12/11/narodam_mira_nuzhna_bezopasnaya_evraziya

tasks of restructuring the world in the interests of the expansionist policies of the EU and the United States, i.e., the development of the globalization process.¹²

Due to the development of globalization processes, many new Eurasian states are increasingly forced to correlate (and sometimes subordinate) their practical economic interests and national aspirations to the military-strategic position of the United States. Hence the statements of support for anti-Russian sanctions by representatives of the current political elites of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, etc. In this regard, it is necessary to recall the traditional maneuvering of local political elites in the 19th century between Great Britain, Qing China, the Russian and Ottoman Empires in this region. In the realities of today, this phenomenon has received the name “multi-vectorality.”

The beginning of the West’s hybrid war against Russia and the constant introduction of new anti-Russian sanctions, not only of an economic nature (“the abolition of Russian culture,” for example) resulted in the emergence of a number of new aspects in the political processes of Eurasia. The initial political competition on the Eurasian continent is now being replaced by political administration [Nisnevich 2023]. In this process, it is necessary to study the change of political generations and the formation of new political elites and adequately assess them.

Let us continue with some comparisons of political events that changed the political landscape of Eurasia. One of the significant manifestations of the interaction of the Eurasian peoples was what is known as the “Tatar-Mongol conquest” [Halperin 1985; 2020]. The Golden (Great) Horde for many years represented the most serious external threat to Muscovite Russia. For modern actors, the Muscovite state is a kind of example of successful incorporation of the territory of a former enemy into its borders and assimilation of the Horde heritage.

Modern politicians and political scientists should not deny such a peculiarity of the Russian mentality and the way of building interstate relations as the absence of rigid ethnic demarcation. It is believed that after the fall of the Great Horde in 1502, the Russian state began to move “towards the sun” (i.e. to the East), and foreign policy relations with various state entities and peoples developed. Even before the middle of the 15th century, the transition of Tatar murzas to the service of Moscow princes became a fairly common phenomenon [Kotlyarov 2017]. Later, most of the Horde aristocracy joined the Russian nobility. Thus, Russia became the only great power of modern times that acquired the unique experience of involving a large neighbor-enemy in the formation of its own statehood. In this regard, the article-hypothesis by T.V. Bordachev “Russian Foreign Policy Culture and the Horde” is of undoubted interest, where the author concludes: “The Horde era” forms the unique features of modern Russian foreign policy.¹³

Another important feature of political processes on the continent is the slow pace of Russia’s foreign policy actions, which G. Kennan once called “a fluid stream,

¹² See, for example, [Aitken 2010; Zhetpysbaev 2022]; Abuyev, N. *The Great Steppe. On the 550th Anniversary of the Kazakh Khanate*. Retrieved April 15, 2024, from: <https://qazaquni.kz/rukhaniyat/40393-velikaya-step-k-550-letiyu-kazahskogo-han>

¹³ Bordachev, T.V. *Russian Foreign Policy Culture and the Horde: Hypothesis Article*. Retrieved September 11, 2024, from <https://svop.ru/main/45315/>

constantly <...> moving toward a designated goal” [X. 1947: 575]. Such a monotonous movement toward a specific goal has determined a certain “viscosity” of Russian foreign policy, which is now considered a basic characteristic of Russia’s behavior in the foreign policy arena. A number of modern experts highlight this feature as an essential characteristic of the actions of the Russian president in the current realities, calling it an organic historical phenomenon. The actions of the Russian state differed from the colonialist policies of Western states. For example, the resettlement of representatives of the Russian peasantry and military class in the annexed lands was not accompanied by the expulsion of nomads and the sedentary part of the local population. Today, experts are analyzing similar examples in other countries of Eurasia.¹⁴

It is of research interest to examine the foreign policy activities of the first Russian emperor. He is considered a convinced Westerner, but one cannot ignore the importance of the southern and eastern directions of Peter the Great’s foreign policy. During the celebration of Peter the Great’s 350th anniversary, MGIMO Rector A.V. Torkunov expressed the opinion that the Eurasian essence of the first Russian emperor’s geopolitical thinking remains underestimated to this day.¹⁵

It seems necessary to draw attention to the term “defensive expansionism,” which allows us to adequately analyze the events of the 18th–19th centuries: territorial expansion and control over frontier lands both by immediate neighbors and distant countries that had their own interests here (the peoples of the Great Steppe, India, China, Persia, Great Britain, etc.). If the Europeans considered the inhabitants of the Eurasian East and South to be backward and uncivilized, then Russian travelers, officials, and military personnel treated the inhabitants of local lands quite differently. The missions and expeditions that advanced from the Russian Empire to the Far East had a multifaceted purpose. Their main task was to establish diplomatic relations (trade agreements), as well as exchange science, education, and culture. Researchers regularly mention that the EU and the USA continue to consider the countries of central Eurasia to be “the jungle of the modern world.”

In today’s reality, it would be clearly useful to recall the development of the process of annexation of the Kyrgyz-Kaisak steppes to the Russian Empire. Participants and eyewitnesses of the events of those years testified that “the settled Cossacks are in incomparably better relations with the Kyrgyz than the detachment ones, because their leadership is provided with agriculture, and they themselves need their Kyrgyz neighbors and try to maintain friendly relations with them” [Babkov 1912: 36]. At that time, the point of view was: “The Great Russian Cossack <...> is alien to separatism, has an excellent command of the language for the most part, is familiar with the customs of the natives, has no prejudices, he is a pleasant guest in the yurt of the Kyrgyz” [Kazhenova 2005: 83–84]. Separately, attention should be paid to the memoirs of Orthodox missionaries who operated in the Great Steppe. When describing one of the

¹⁴ *Russia has offered Mongolia something that neither China nor anyone else in the world can do.* Retrieved September 11, 2024, from: https://dzen.ru/a/ZUDfYQ6yFiSi_sxL

¹⁵ Torkunov, A.V. *Petrovskoe “window to the East” as a premonition of the future.* Retrieved November 9, 2022, from <https://svop.ru/main/42923/?ysclid=luv1y9l7nm879441231>

Cossacks, Filaret Sinkovsky points out: “he is wearing a Kirghiz hat, robe or beshmet, he knows the Kirghiz language well, and rides horsemen” [Sinkovsky 1884: 20]. Another Orthodox missionary writes: “Kokpekty and Bukon are small oases among a solid Kirghiz population... The dominant language here is Kirghiz, and it is rare to meet someone who does not know Kirghiz. And the Russians themselves seem to speak Kirghiz among themselves more than they speak Russian” [Petrov 1893: 40]. Such evidence acquires special value in connection with the problems of Russian migration policy. In this regard, we will recall the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in China, created during the era of Peter the Great. In the daily work of the mission staff, principles of mutually respectful relations between representatives of different peoples, confessions, and states were formed. Based on this evidence, we can conclude that bilingual (even trilingual) professional education is necessary within the framework of Eurasian integration.

The history of the formation of interstate relations between Russia and China is also important for the current situation. It was Russia during the time of Peter the Great that became the first European state visited by Chinese embassies. Peter the Great’s Rus’ and Qing China developed diplomatic relations that were unique for that time and essentially different from those that existed between European states and Eastern countries (it is enough to recall the so-called “opium wars,” with the help of which British colonizers tried to penetrate the territory of the Qing Empire and dictate to the emperor their conditions for constructing his foreign policy).

In recent years, the idea of coupling (harmonizing, according to the Chinese side) Eurasian economic integration with the Chinese initiative of the Silk Road Economic Belt has taken shape. Researchers emphasize that it is partly of a protective nature, since it allows for the relief of tensions that would inevitably arise in the event of unregulated competition between further efforts to develop the EAEU and Beijing’s activity in the post-Soviet space.

Today, Eurasia continues to act as an arena for a gradually escalating struggle between various states. It is one of the key points of support in solving current political and economic problems. Analysts and experts assess the Eurasian region as a territory of geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural confrontation between the conventional East and the conventional West. In this regard, a thorough analysis of regionalism and transregionalism in the formation of a renewed Eurasian political landscape seems important. The kind of civilizational split that has emerged here requires objective study, since Eurasia is defined as a “field of expansion of civilizations bordering it” [Ageev, Kuroedov, Sandarov 2011: 27].

Conclusion

Consideration of the evolution of political processes in the Eurasian space provides an opportunity to scientifically substantiate the analysis of modern political processes in Eurasia. We believe it is especially necessary due to the fact that in the 21st century, former Soviet republics, striving to build national states, do not always interpret political processes and political actors of the past objectively. They are confident in the

obligatory legitimization of nationalist discourse, which is the reverse side of the process of building their own statehood.

It seems urgent to correct a number of political science concepts that have come into modern terminology from Western political science. This concerns not only the term “Central Asia.” The policy of a part of the elites of post-Soviet states is becoming a special subject of scientific analysis. Such elites proceed from the fact that their significance as states that are hidden or openly friendly to the West has increased largely, and they receive additional opportunities for economically effective multi-vectorism. The contradictory nature of such an approach is obvious, but it itself appears to be a product of the uncertainty of the geoeconomic status of post-Soviet Eurasia, its growing geoeconomic multi-vectorism, and a reflection of a number of aspects of the formation of a multipolar world.

Comparison of manifestations of historical and political interaction on the continent creates the opportunity to objectively assess current events. In order to solve emerging interstate and intra-country problems, it seems necessary to address and conduct an in-depth, transdisciplinary approach-based objective study of the historical experience of centuries-old political and cultural interaction of Eurasian peoples and states, as well as to reject pseudo-scientific opinions and introduce objective assessments into broad scientific and practical circulation.

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About the author:

Irlan Zh. Iskakov — PhD in Law, Associate Professor, Rector, University under the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of EurAsEC, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation (e-mail: iiel2002@mail.ru) (ORCID: 0000-0001-6557-4142)