

CDSSES 2020**IV International Scientific Conference "Competitiveness and the development of socio-economic systems" dedicated to the memory of Alexander Tatarkin****IRAN AND RUSSIA'S ROLE IN REGIONAL SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL EURASIA**

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mandana.tishehyar@gmail.com**Abstract**

In a globalized world, regions are still playing a key role in the integration of societies, especially from social and economic perspectives. To achieve sustainable development goals at the national level, governments should consider the safety and security of the territories beyond their borders. As a result, regional sustainable development is a critical factor in shaping regional integration and cooperation among powerful countries in a region. The present study aims to analyze how Iran and Russia could achieve regional social development in their neighbouring regions by defining a regional cooperation program. The study will mainly focus on the Central Eurasian region, including Central Asia and South Caucasus. The Author has tried to examine the opportunities available for Iran and Russia to have regional cooperation within the framework of the Neo-regionalism Theory. In the end, the researcher has suggested some strategies for the expansion of regional social development by Iranian and Russian civil societies with the aim of improving peace and sustainability in their common region.

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1. Introduction

Cultural convergence of the countries located in the same region has a long history. Similar backgrounds, integrated traditions, and the common cultures of the people living in a broad geographical region are the bases for regional integration of governments in the world today. While accepting globalization of some patterns in the international arena, political units have tried to redefine their interests and identities in the regional framework next to their neighbouring countries. Therefore, theories of regionalism, which had a place among the international relations theories of the 1960s and 1970s, have quickly redefined their basic tenets since the 1990s and, following the collapse of the Soviet Union; new approaches have emerged in the framework of the Neo-regionalism.

In today world, Neo-regionalism has provided the grounds for the formation of various layers of regional cooperation, based on the principles of “thematic openness” and “geographical flexibility,” and has sometimes claimed to provide the foundations for new kinds of cooperation at the international level.

It is also possible to define a new sphere of cooperation between countries, cooperation which, according to classic definitions of the region, we saw in North Asia, Caucasus, Central Asia, West Asia, and the like, and according to the new definition of the region, we might see in a new region called Central Eurasia, with a focus on the South Caucasus and the Central Asian societies.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. The Rival Social Identity Discourses in the Central Eurasian Region

The region that is currently known as Central Eurasia has assumed various social identities since previous centuries. Despite their unique geopolitical positions and, as Mackinder believes, their being located at the “Heartland”, these lands have mostly been scenes for conflicts between great powers in different periods rather than being powerful empires themselves (Harper, 2017). The wars between Iran and Turan, extensively described in ancient writings, are all demonstrative of the importance of governing the region occupied by the two powerful mythical kingdoms in ancient times (Ferdowsi, 1395/2016).

In later periods also, the Chinese and the Mongols on the one hand, and the Iranians and Romans on the other, have done their best to get their hands on some parts of these lands and tried to have political, cultural, and religious influence over the peoples of the Central Eurasian region. The arrival of Arabs and the introduction of Islam into the region also added to the complexity of social and political relations in the region. Although in later centuries small and large emirates arose in these areas, each living in connection with larger world empires, one might rarely find a ruler who could have founded a powerful and enduring kingdom in these lands. The only exception was the Timur Gurkani, who was himself a descendant of Genghis Khan the Mongol (Bastani Rad, 2018; Shea, 2018).

Meanwhile, from a social point of view and as evidenced by history, Central Eurasian societies are often based on the so-called “multicultural lifestyle” and are made up of peoples from different races and ethnicities, with different religions and rituals, and having multiple languages and cultures who all live in a peaceful symbiosis. They set up large cities on the ways of trade caravans and, in this way, traded with peoples from other territories. This way of life and territorial characteristics paved the way for the

formation of a culture of tolerance and acceptance of cultural and religious diversity among the communities of these lands (Burkhanov, 2019).

Famous mystic tendencies, especially in the Cultural Khorasan, and the acceptance of cultural and religious diversities among the peoples of these lands all signify the multicultural societies in previous centuries. Also, the literary heritage left from the same period and their historical monuments, especially in the fields of painting and architecture, show the importance of literature and art in the cultural and social prosperity of the communities of this region in past centuries (Rezakhani, 2017).

Since the seventeenth century, with the increasing presence of Tsarist Russia in these areas, a new sociocultural model was introduced into these societies, which later laid the foundations for the formation of social modernity. In fact, Russia has been as a cultural bridge between these regions and Europe and has introduced a new social and cultural lifestyle into these communities. This process accelerated during the communist era and the rule of the Soviet Union, leaving deeper social and cultural impacts on these societies (Christian, 2017).

Today, three decades after its independence, the region has gained a unique situation due to the diversity of its cultural and identity elements. As the presence of Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Shamanic, and various Christian and Islamic religions can still be found among the peoples of these lands, the languages spoken here are also combinations of Persian, Turkish, Arabic, and Russian along with numerous other indigenous languages (Bahry, 2016). In their social rituals and customs also, one can find traces of Iranian, Mongol, Arab, Russian, Turk, European and other societies along with their indigenous cultures.

Accordingly, although most of these countries are not so large and host relatively small populations, the racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious diversities in this region are considerably high and the statesmen at each of these newly-independent republics have faced great difficulties over the past three decades in defining a single social identity pattern to shape their modern national identity.

In the meantime, since in the framework of Neo-regionalism, it can be said that common cultural and social patterns can define common identities and because common identities could also lead to common interests, in the new Great Game defined in the form of a competition between important international and regional powers in this part of the world during recent decades, efforts have been made by all regional and international actors to expand political and economic relations with these newly independent republics as well as to strengthen their cultural and social presence in these communities (Soderbaum, 2015). This has, in turn, increased the spread of rival cultural discourses and created new social gaps between different generations and social classes in these countries. Therefore, in the same three decades, rather than seeking cultural and identity convergence with their neighbouring lands, these countries have experienced increasing social unrests caused by inconsistent identity discourses. It has also prevented the formation of regional convergence significantly.

Meanwhile, despite the deep historical, cultural and social ties Iran and Russia have had with Central Eurasian communities and notwithstanding the several ethnic, religious and linguistic commonalities between the two countries and the peoples of Central Eurasia which have also strengthened their cultural and social ties, they have been affected by the same regional cultural competitions. Improper policies about their cultural presence and cooperation in the Central Eurasian

region over the past three decades have had two consequences: first, rather than conducting cultural and scientific cooperation at the regional level and providing the bases for stronger ties between themselves and the peoples of these newly independent countries through emphasizing their common cultural and identity values, Iran and Russia have tended to stand in cultural confrontation with each other and considered the other side as their rival. Second, this unwritten competition has provided a unique opportunity for other cultural discourses around the world to establish themselves for the first time among the Central Asian and Caucasus communities. Western teachings, with their emphasis on the capitalist lifestyle, Pan-Turkism, extremist Islamism in the form of Wahhabism, and even the New Chinese discourse in the form of economic and cultural cooperation, have gradually increased their presence in these societies over the past three decades, thereby reducing social, cultural and scientific cooperation between Iran and Russia and the countries of the region.

Thus, the lack of cooperation between Iran and Russia for attaining sustainable social development in the countries of Central Eurasia, seems, on the one hand, to have distanced these countries from their historical identity-building elements and, on the other hand, it has replaced new teachings having few relevance to the ancient cultures and traditions of this region for the previous cultural and social discourses. Not only has this weakened the civil ties at the regional level, but, as noted earlier, the existing identity differences have also brought about conflicts of interests between these countries and their two northern and southern neighbours.

The cultural and social rivalries between Iran and Russia in the region has not made the two countries to increase their presence and cooperation with these countries. Today, media propaganda pretends that Russia's presence in the region is more pronounced in the military and security spheres and that west-oriented policies are encouraging regional governments to abandon the Russian language under the pretext of emphasizing national and indigenous languages, thereby frightening them from expanding cultural cooperation with Russia. Regarding Iran also, ever since the independence of these eight republics, it has been propagated that the Islamic Republic of Iran wants to export the Islamic Revolution and Shiite teachings to these countries, especially among Islamist groups, and this has led to considering any cultural activity with Iran, including the joint historical research, teaching Persian as the language of their ancestors, or expansion of social relations in the form of holding ancient cultural celebrations, as Iran's cultural influence aimed at overthrowing the secular systems in these countries (Koolae & Tishehyar, 2016).

But the fundamental question may be that in what social, cultural and scientific fields Iran and Russia could cooperate and strengthen regional ties with Central Eurasian communities and achieve sustainable social development. In what follows, the question will be discussed in more detail.

2.2. Areas for the socio-cultural convergence of Iran and Central Eurasia

Iran and the Central Eurasian countries have traditionally enjoyed a common civilization, identity, and culture. Although the political boundaries and the emphasis on nationalist elements (such as ethnicity) have caused the peoples of these countries to consider themselves belonging to areas rather than their neighbouring regions, the common culture of these lands, as an important identity element, has tied them to each other and to their neighbouring countries.

Not so long ago, the countries in the region carried the legacies of the culture-based traditions in a common civilization, which for centuries had created a kind of cultural convergence beyond national boundaries or even ethnical and religious divisions. To demonstrate Iran's potential capacities for developing socio-cultural partnerships with the Central Eurasian countries, among various cultural components the author has chosen the common mystic teachings as important socio-cultural elements which have historically converged people in this region and are still a significant part of their socio-cultural identities.

These principles were unique moral and social schools whose functions were not limited to religion and led to special cultural and civilizational achievements. The Khorasan School, one of the largest cultural-mystical schools of thought in this geographic area, which includes major intellectuals and thinkers, not only accepts the principles of Islamic theology but has also been influenced by pre-Islamic religions.

Khorasan, encompassing the Central Asian and some regions in South and West Asia including Marv, Balkh, Nisa, Neyshabur, Toos, Herat, Termez, Samarkand and Bukhara, Esfarayen, Bastam, Kharghan, Damghan and other areas, has been far beyond the current political boundaries.

Since the 8th century when the Khorasan School was established, until the 15th century, most of the founders of Sufism were from Khorasan territory and Khorasan was more than anywhere, including Aleppo, Baghdad, and Hamedan prepared to accept different ideas and opinions. One of the advantages of the Khorasan School is its proximity to chivalry (Ayyari) (Lavizen, 1384/2005, p. 236). The result was the presence of Sufism and Mysticism in the social, political and economic spheres and the association of people with the Sufi elders in those meetings. The School of Khorasan may be mostly recognized with futuwwa (generosity), reflecting their social behaviour through which "serving others and being kind to the people" was spread into other areas and institutionalized as a culture. As Bakhezri (1395/2016, p. 177) puts it, "being responsible and kind welcoming of newcomers" were considered as duties.

Indeed, this School itself originated from the cultural traditions of these societies, including generosity and chivalry, and was based on the perspectives of the individuals who were fighting against oppression and tyrannies of the sovereigns. The existing tolerance and sacrament in the Khorasan School are of considerable importance, which is also because other schools of thought such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Manichaeism have influenced the mystical branch of Khorasan (Saki, 1384/2005).

Thus, considering its deep thoughts, the Sufism of the Khorasan School involves a series of characteristics such as trying to establish world peace, opposing oppression, scientific undertakings, and a tendency towards the elites. The above characteristics have led to the creation of important works and achievements such as the formation of mystical literature and poetry as well as the proximity of Sufism to other religious and social movements (Sadri et al., 1397/2018).

Unlike the Iraqi School which emphasizes isolationism, asceticism, seclusion, and monasticism and urges its followers to stay away from people and go to the monasteries, the Khorasan School elites believed that they should experience and live with people. Therefore, this School broadly affected the social lives of the people. Hence, scholars, writers, poets and mystics played a special role in shaping the lifestyles of citizens of these areas and building a good pattern of governance in these areas (Sajadi, 1372/1993). Publication of literary works with moral contents for the kings, formulation of policy letters

(siasat nameh) and the appointment of prominent scholars as the ministers and secretaries of the kingdoms all underlie the formation of a political culture based on tolerance, peace and ethics in different societies of this part of the world during past centuries. Therefore, culture has had social and political functions rather than literary and artistic usage and has helped to establish stability and create moral traditions in this region.

On the other hand, along with the expansion of the spiritual and religious influence of the sheikhs in Khorasan, we could witness the expansion of Sufist schools in Azerbaijan and the emergence of genuine Sufi figures in this region. During the 9th to 11th centuries, the first group of Sufis paid more attention to Khorasan School. Ibrahim Joynani and Abu Nasr Sharwani were the agents for transferring the persuasions existing in Khorasan to Sharwan, currently located in Azerbaijan (Taheri Khosrow Shahi, 1395/2016).

In Azerbaijan, Sufism burgeoned in the Shams School during the 7th century through which it found its way to the Masnavi and other Rumi poems since Rumi's correspondences with the scholars from Termez and proximity of his ideas to those of Sanai and Attar all testify the Khorasani origins of his mysticism. Such perspectives later expanded throughout the Caucasus and Anatolia, creating various schools of Sufism.

The combination of the Muslims' mystical views and the Sufi approaches of other religions such as Hindus and Buddhists created a tendency toward tolerance and coexistence among the people living in these geographic areas. Therefore, today, the recreation of the prevailing cultural teachings among the peoples of these territories helps to discover approaches for new cultural convergences and gives a new identity to the old functions of these cultural elements.

Today, considering the political and social situation of these societies, which are divided into separate states through political borders and each is striving to define an independent and separate identity, it can be truly understood that insecurity at national and regional levels originates from the efforts to foment nationalist policies of states and to refrain from creating a joint collective identity in the region. Avoidance to accept the peaceful and tolerant perceptions of religions have also caused religious extremisms and fanatical definitions of religion to fuel the flames of anger in this region and to increase ethnic, religious, and national hostilities. This is despite the fact that the common history of the region was mostly based on peaceful and humanistic interpretations of religion, and religious extremism was a marginal and unpopular trend in this civilizational area.

2.3. Areas for the Socio-cultural Convergence of Russia and Central Eurasia

Since the increase of its presence in the Central Eurasian region, Russia has always played the role of a bridge between the modern European lifestyle in Europe and the traditional lifestyle of the Central Eurasian societies. In fact, as Islam reached Central Eurasia together with a combination of Iranian elements and led to the crystallization of different features from various other Muslim lands in the region, the European modernity reached Central Eurasia together with elements from Russian culture, art, and literature, hence being able to be called the Russian modernity.

This process, which had begun in the eighteenth century, entered a new phase in 1925 with the proclamation of Russian as the official language of the peoples of Central Eurasia. With the cultural and

artistic approaches that the socialist system had throughout the Soviet republics, which often consisted of traditional societies based on classical culture and customs, a new model of social life was introduced in these societies. In this way, the Central Eurasian societies who were already familiar with the Russian classical literary and cultural works and saw many of these works in connection with their own cultures and traditions started to face a new model of social and cultural relations where a new class of educated workers were trained, leftist intellectuals were supported, societies were developed in terms of science and culture, public education was promoted, and educational inequality between urban and rural areas was eliminated.

In this new model, a central system was defined for social and cultural activities that both emphasized Western cultural and artistic elements and respected the indigenous and folklore arts and cultures. Thus, the classical music, opera, ballet, theatre, and cinema of the west were taught in schools hand in hand with the indigenous folk arts. The central government's support for cultural and artistic programs, providing job security to the artists who did not disagree with the government, and the continuation of cultural programs for decades paved the way for the establishment of the programs in these communities.

In this period, in fact, the most important obstacle to the development of deep cultural and social ties between the Central Eurasian and Russian societies was the avoidance to allow the display of religious arts, which, according to socialist views, were not allowed to be manifested.

Despite the criticisms pointed at the centralization of social and cultural programs at that time, it can be seen that with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of its strong support for cultural and social programs in the various republics of Central Eurasia, and the inability of the newly-independent governments of these republics which were struggling with deep economic problems to support these programs, the cultural programs experienced a large decline and the ties between societies through the relations of social, scientific and cultural elites were weakened, leading to each of the republics taking a different path in the area.

Transition to capitalism and the free market system also intensified this trend, leaving fewer opportunities for the continuation of previous social and cultural trends. The brain drains and the outbreak of civil wars and the resulting insecurities in some of these republics have also reduced cultural ties with Russia, with the governments in these countries seeking to construct separate identities inspired by Western theories.

As a result, these societies, on the one hand, following the Western lifestyles, are rapidly moving away from their valuable cultural backgrounds and, on the other hand, traditional conservative groups, especially in Islamic societies, seek to return to previous identity elements in an extremist fashion, hence providing the means for the creation of extreme religious tendencies being emerged among some social groups.

However, the former cultural elements still remaining in these societies are considerable. Today, despite the links with their peers in other countries are weaker than before, such institutions as philharmonic orchestras, academies of science, public libraries and museums, cultural houses, and associations of writers and artists in Central Eurasia are all reminiscent of earlier periods and the social and cultural relations between the Soviet-era republics.

3. Research Questions

The main question of the study is, then, how Iran and Russia have still been able to shape a new level of regional cooperation with the Central Eurasian countries despite the heterogeneity in their perceptions of national interests.

4. Purpose of the Study

The present study aims at considering the relations between Iran and Russia in the Central Eurasian region and the role played by Neo-regionalism in explaining or interpreting the cooperation between these countries with a focus on the main characteristics of Neo-regionalism in modern times.

5. Research Methods

To investigate the possibility of regional cooperation between Iran, Russia and the Central Eurasian countries, the author has opted for a theoretical framework based on Neo-regionalism and then has evaluated Iran and Russia's regional cooperation capacities with a focus on their common cultural elements.

6. Findings

The answer to the question and the hypothesis of the present paper is that Iran and Russia can arrive at a common definition of identities and values with the Central Eurasian countries by governing the patterns of foreign relations and making use of the cultural capacities of regional convergence, despite the heterogeneity of interests which exists in some respects.

The researcher believes that such integration is probable because the level of analysis of the relations between Iran, Russia and the Central Eurasian countries is going to change from a micro-level of bilateral relations or a macro-level of global relations to a more mid-level of regional relations with more emphasis on cultural integration.

7. Conclusion

Security is the ability of a country in parrying internal and external threats against its political existence or its national interests. Based on the constructivist and Neo-regionalist approaches to the relations between nations, a new definition of security elements may be presented.

As mentioned in the introduction, to investigate the possibility of regional cooperation between Iran, Russia and the Central Eurasian countries, the Author tried to choose a theoretical framework based on Neo-regionalism theories and then to evaluate Iran and Russia's regional cooperation capacities.

We can conclude that through a Neo-regionalist approach, the attempts for cultural convergence and the emphasis on common cultural components such as common cultural values, historical backgrounds, and common traditions can converge these countries more than ever and help them develop cooperation at the regional level. Although the diverging aspect of the above cultural elements is

highlighted in the classical definitions which focus on nationalism as one of the main obstacles to regional cooperation, the author believes that these elements are capable of promoting integration in the region and establishing cultural ties between these societies rather than being just evidence for the divergence among the inhabitants of the Central Eurasian countries.

In the world today, where people can easily cross political boundaries to connect to each other, planning to establish a cultural approach with the goal of regional convergence is more probable than ever. Similar identities, shared interests, and cooperation among nations in the Central Eurasian region together with an emphasis on the convergent cultural-civilizational elements will provide the basis for the establishment of stability and security in the region.

Meanwhile, if we consider Neo-regionalism from a constructivist perspective, it is assumed that identities are formed by cultures, traditions and customs of societies. As interests also emerge according to identities, therefore cooperation, reconciliation and stability in societies depend largely on common interests. Then, it can be concluded that the revision of cultural traditions of the region plays a key role in creating similar identities, common interests, and stable and secure partnerships.

From another viewpoint, since security in the modern world is cross-boundary and not limited to a specific territory, to achieve economic dynamism and political and social stability, countries located in the region have no choice but to work together. Collaborations in the current era, then, follow two main goals: first, reducing tensions among the states of this geographical area; second, establishing new conventions to confront ethnic and religious extremist approaches. Achieving the two mentioned goals may help approaching other goals of political and economic cooperation among these countries.

Cultural similarities and the existence of shared cultural elements among the peoples of this broad geographical area have contributed to the formation of common identities from a long time ago. Today, the revival of these common identities not only helps the cultural convergence of the people residing in these regions, but it can also form the basis of stability or what can be called “culture-based security”.

Under these circumstances, focusing on “cultural diplomacy” and the new “Cultural Eurasia” is very useful and necessary for promoting economic and political cooperation and establishing culture-based security. In other words, utilization of the common cultural and social elements in these societies may help produce a better understanding of the inhabitants in the region and, along with the diplomatic efforts of the states, build confidence and cooperation among nations.

Accordingly, the Author believes that given the new trends emerged in the Central Eurasian region during the last three decades, Iran and Russia need to reconsider their cultural and social approaches to the communities of this region. Relying on the social and cultural ties they have with the countries of the region, these two countries can establish the process of forming Cultural Eurasia and use the capacities of non-political institutions, including universities, research institutes, associations and NGOs, to define various networks for cultural and social cooperation with Central Eurasian countries and use the capacity of academicians in Iran, Russia and other countries of the region in the form of scientific and cultural diplomacy. In other words, cultural agents are more able to establish a social link between these communities than political and economic experts. This could also amend those trends, which had previously widened social gaps in these communities and gradually develop the cultural values based on tolerance and reconciliation at national and regional levels. Undoubtedly, Cultural Eurasia can be a good

infrastructure for the development of political and economic cooperation among the countries of the region.

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