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Russia's Network Diplomacy in Eurasia: From the EAEU to the Greater Eurasian Partnership

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Abstract. The present study is of particular pertinence in the context of the transformation of the mechanisms of diplomatic interaction that has occurred in the wake of the expansion of the composition of participants and the diversification of the areas of international cooperation. In this regard, the Russian Federation seeks to use the potential of network diplomacy to establish a dialogue with interested partners from among like-minded states and representatives of the non-governmental sector. The purpose of the study is to assess the prospects for the development of Russia's network diplomacy in Eurasia as a key tool for establishing ties with regional and extra-regional ("external contour") actors. The scientific novelty of the study lies in the fact that using the example of the Eurasian region the authors comprehensively consider various institutions and mechanisms of network interaction — from broad-profile regional formats to highly specialized working groups on specific tracks. The analysis is based on a systems approach. The article includes an in-depth study conducted with the use of the institutional research method of various formats of network diplomacy, including flexibility, lack of hierarchy and openness. It was revealed that in Eurasia Russia is able to address multiple issues concurrently through the network diplomacy. Firstly, such diplomacy is required at the initial stage of development of integration processes and is based on the model of multi-speed and multi-level integration, as evidenced by the Eurasian integration paradigm prior to the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Secondly, network diplomacy is aimed at deepening sectoral cooperation within the framework of working groups of regional structures — the EAEU and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), uniting government experts and representatives of the non-governmental sector. Thirdly, in the post-Soviet space, including Eurasia, Russia tested such network diplomacy tools such as conflict resolution formats. Fourthly, the potential of network diplomacy is important to form a single integration contour in Eurasia. The authors conclude that network diplomacy in Eurasia plays an important role in creating additional opportunities for equal dialogue with member states of regional multilateral structures and other interested countries, including the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the SCO. It facilitates the prevention of the risk of fragmentation of Eurasia. In this regard, the most promising course of action appears to be the promotion of the Greater Eurasian Partnership initiative — a project that accumulates the potential and resources of states, multilateral associations (EAEU, SCO, ASEAN) and initiatives of individual regional actors (Belt and Road Initiative).

Key words: network interaction, Eurasian space, single integration contour, multi-speed integration, multipolarity, world order, world majority, belt of good neighborliness



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Сетевая дипломатия России в Евразии: от ЕАЭС к Большому Евразийскому партнерству

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Аннотация. Актуальность исследования обусловлена тем, что на фоне трансформации механизмов дипломатического взаимодействия за счет расширения состава участников и диверсификации сфер международного сотрудничества Российская Федерация стремится использовать потенциал сетевой дипломатии для выстраивания диалога с заинтересованными партнерами из числа государств-единомышленников, а также представителей неправительственного сектора. Цель работы — оценка перспектив развития сетевой дипломатии России в Евразии в качестве ключевого инструмента налаживания связей с региональными и внерегиональными («внешним контуром») акторами. Научная новизна исследования состоит в том, что на примере Евразийского региона комплексно рассматриваются различные институты и механизмы сетевого взаимодействия — от широкопрофильных региональных форматов до узкоспециализированных рабочих групп по отдельным трекам. При проведении анализа применялся системный подход. Глубокому изучению особенностей функционирования различных форматов сетевой дипломатии, в частности таких, как гибкость, отсутствие иерархии и открытость, способствовало применение институционального метода исследования. Выявлено, что в Евразии сетевая дипломатия позволяет России решить сразу несколько задач. Во-первых, подобная дипломатия востребована на начальном этапе развития интеграционных процессов и опирается на модель разноскоростной разноуровневой интеграции, что подтверждает пример евразийской интеграции до образования Евразийского экономического союза (ЕАЭС). Во-вторых, сетевая дипломатия ориентирована на углубление отраслевого сотрудничества в рамках рабочих групп региональных структур — ЕАЭС и Шанхайской организации сотрудничества (ШОС), объединяющих правительственных экспертов и представителей неправительственного сектора. В-третьих, на постсоветском пространстве, в том числе в Евразии, были апробированы такие инструменты сетевой дипломатии, как форматы по урегулированию конфликтов. В-четвертых, потенциал сетевой дипломатии используется для формирования единого интеграционного контура в Евразии. Авторы приходят к выводу о важной роли сетевой дипломатии в Евразии в контексте создания дополнительных возможностей для равноправного диалога с государствами — членами региональных многосторонних структур и другими заинтересованными странами, в том числе странами, входящими в Ассоциацию государств Юго-Восточной Азии (АСЕАН) и ШОС, предотвращения риска фрагментации Евразии. Наиболее перспективным в этой связи представляются инициативы Большого Евразийского партнерства — проекта, аккумулирующего потенциал и ресурсы государств, многосторонних объединений (ЕАЭС, ШОС, АСЕАН) и инициатив отдельных региональных акторов («Один пояс, один путь»).

Ключевые слова: сетевое взаимодействие, евразийское пространство, единый интеграционный контур, разноскоростная интеграция, многополярность, миропорядок, мировое большинство, пояс добрососедства

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Вклад авторов. Булва В.И.: концептуализация, анализ и систематизация информации, проведение исследования, подготовка рукописи. Бобров А.К.: разработка методологии исследования, подбор материалов, научное руководство исследованием. Все авторы ознакомлены с окончательной версией статьи и одобрили ее.

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Introduction

Nowadays network diplomacy opens up new horizons in the domain of international cooperation. Starting out as a theoretical concept that was coined amid the diversification of world politics actors (Keohane & Nye, 2011) and the securitization of its fields (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998), it has evolved into a tool of foreign policy of different states.

At present, there is a substantial difference between the Western and Russian interpretations of the concept of ‘network diplomacy.’ On the one hand, in their respective works on network diplomacy A.-M. Slaughter (2017), C.M. Constantinou, P. Sharp (Constantinou & Sharp, 2016), A. Cooper, J. Heine and R. Thakur (Cooper, Heine & Thakur, 2013) emphasize the growing number of actors in this field that has to do with the growing role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Curiously, certain foreign researchers point out that the means of network diplomacy may be used to resolve international conflicts and disputes. To be more specific, it is S. Choi (Choi, 2023) who analyzes this dimension in relation to the matter in question. Moreover, C. Hayden points out to the growing potential of network diplomacy with the advent of the information era, thus highlighting new instruments of diplomatic interaction that appeared as a result of the development of information and communication technologies

(ICT) (Hayden, 2013). On the other hand, Russian researchers (Burganova, 2016; Vorontsova, 2017; Kolosova, 2014; Kunina, 2022) regard network diplomacy as one of the forms of multilateral diplomacy, in which the main role is attributed to nation-states.

Nevertheless, both Russian (Morozov, Shebalina & Lebedeva, 2019) and Western authors (Metzl, 2001) stress the following distinguishing features of network diplomacy: flexibility, the lack of hierarchy and the absence of rigid bureaucratic structures of its organs and mechanisms. This facilitates the reduction of the time gap when it comes to coordinating decisions and enables the incorporation of those countries that dodge full participation in multilateral institutions (for instance, neutral states) or are unwilling to cooperate on specific issues.

Based on the above-mentioned approaches to the concept of ‘network diplomacy’ and the analysis of Russia’s means of diplomatic interaction, the authors propose the following definition of the term. We believe that ‘network diplomacy’ should be defined as a type of multilateral diplomacy that is characterized by the absence of bureaucratic institutions, statutory documents and headquarters, while the cooperation between states and different parties concerned is promoted through the so-called “flexible” instruments of interaction. Moreover, it can be advanced on different levels (global, macro

regional, regional) and in different formats. Thus, universal and global ‘network’ institutions have much in common with global intergovernmental organizations, regional integrations and even diplomatic fora aimed at resolving regional crises.

The main advantage of ‘network’ platforms appears to be their openness and inclusiveness, which facilitate the engagement of different parties in the negotiation process. This approach promotes practical decisions that were agreed at the political level through traditional diplomatic cooperation. When businesses and other private investors participate, the financial costs of implementing decisions can be reduced. Academia and members of the scientific community, with their high intellectual potential, are generating ideas and concepts for international cooperation by applying their specific knowledge and skills.

In the realm of Russian foreign policy, the role of network diplomacy became evident in the mid-2000s with the shift from the so-called “bloc approach” typical of the Cold War era to a contemporary multi-vector cooperation on an equal footing with all interested countries. Since then, Russian theorists and practitioners, when referring to ‘network diplomacy,’ have put a premium on global fora, notably the G8 (Larionova & Rakhmangulov, 2009), G20 (Kirton, 2013; Hajnal, 2019; Larionova, 2017) and BRICS (Filatov, 2011; Shelepov, 2015; Kuznetsov, 2020), with their distinguishing feature being wide geographic and multidimensional outreach. At that time, Russia’s grand strategy suggested aligning the country’s international posture with the resources at its disposal. Consequently, it implied the promotion of cooperation with non-Western countries through the use of network institutions such as the G20 and BRICS.

From a practical perspective, these means seemed to be applicable not only at the global, but also at the regional level, which makes it especially relevant to analyze the evolution and

the prospects of network diplomacy in Eurasia. The aforementioned advantages of network cooperation have resulted in enhanced accessibility for the establishment and promotion of ties with a growing number of partnerships, which could be explained, to a certain extent, by the fact that countries could selectively cooperate within a broader agenda. This approach corresponded to the idea of a multi-speed interaction that was pivotal to Russia’s foreign policy in Eurasia.

When analyzing the main works dedicated to Eurasian multilateral diplomacy, it was assumed that researchers focused primarily on regional platforms as a means of bolstering economic (Lissovolik, 2017; Redkina & Krug, 2024; Heifets, 2018) and security (Gallyamova & Aminov, 2022; Zharkov et al., 2024; Turlybayeva, 2022) ties in the region, with a special emphasis on their respective role in contemporary international relations (Budarina & Prokopovich, 2024; Malyshev, 2021; Yenykeyeff, Lukin & Novikov, 2024).

This study aims to identify the features and prospects for the development of formats of Russia’s network diplomacy in Eurasia,¹

¹ Eurasian countries include the EAEU member states (the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Belarus, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and the Russian Federation), the SCO (in addition to the countries that are also members of the EAEU (except Armenia), it includes the Republic of India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan) and the ASEAN member states (the State of Brunei Darussalam, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the Republic of Indonesia, the Kingdom of Cambodia, the People’s Democratic Republic of Laos, Malaysia, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, the Republic of Singapore, the Kingdom of Thailand and the Republic of the Philippines). This approach corresponds to the conceptualization of the notion of Eurasian space, reflected in the Concept of Russia’s Foreign Policy of 2023 (section “Eurasian Continent”, p. 54.2). See: The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by the President of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin on March 31, 2023) // MFA of Russia. March 31, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1860586/> (accessed: 04.23.2025).

actively used in the work of key regional platforms, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), to allow building a dialogue with external partners (states that are not members of these structures) or focusing on specific thematic areas (activities of specialized working groups). In these aspects, this study relies on an institutional method aimed at studying political institutions of interaction and allowing the analysis of the specifics of the process of multi-level (i.e., with the participation of various actors in world politics) cooperation in Eurasia within the framework of network formats of regional organizations (EAEU and SCO). In addition, the need for a more in-depth study of the Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) initiative as the main format of network diplomacy in Eurasia — an integrating factor in Russia's diplomacy in the region — seems promising.

In consideration of the system-oriented approach to contemporary international relations, as developed by Professor A.D. Bogaturov (2017), the authors seek to emphasize the pivotal role of this initiative in the formation of the regional subsystem of contemporary international relations, with a focus on the regional priorities of Russian foreign policy as outlined in the latest version of the nation's primary strategic document, the Foreign Policy Concept of 2023. This approach permits to analyze different elements that form the subsystem — from internal interstate cooperation to external threats (for instance, the activities of the West against Russian interests in the region).

Russia's Network Diplomacy in Eurasia

The main task of Russian diplomacy in Eurasia has so far been to “create the belt of countries that peacefully coexist with Moscow enjoying good-neighbourly relations.” In order

to achieve this goal, traditional diplomacy (summit-level talks, track-one diplomacy) is complemented by means of network diplomacy, which emphasizes flexible forms of cooperation rather than hierarchical configurations. As opposed to the so-called “bloc diplomacy” (i.e. the tug of war between North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact in the Cold War era), these ‘network’ institutions, far from being aimed against a single country or a multilateral alliance, are designed to harness efforts with a view to jointly resolving issues on the international agenda.

The distinguishing feature of Russia's network diplomacy in Eurasia remains to be its applicability at the very outset of regional integration. Thus, in the mid-2000s it was oriented towards the Customs Union and the Common Economic Space as precursors to the Eurasian Economic Union. A number of Russian researchers have pointed out to this tendency. For instance, I. Zeleneva and D. Ivanovskii regarded the EAEU as an element of network alliances (Zeleneva & Ivanovskii, 2018, p. 46), which transformed into a full-fledged regional integration.

The participants in Eurasian integration are the states that initiated the process in the early 2000s by forming the Customs Union and the Common Economic Space, thus acting as the “core” of the future Eurasian Economic Community, then the EAEU (Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan) and other countries of the region (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and, from 2006 to 2008, Uzbekistan, later Armenia). The consolidation of the region has been greatly facilitated by the use of network cooperation. Thanks to network formats, numerous NGOs, not only states, became participants in cooperation, which led to the establishment of sustainable socio-humanitarian and economic depoliticized international ties and the “unifying” agenda. At the present stage, the trend towards strengthening the existing and

creating new platforms of this kind is still underway.

In this regard, it is imperative to invoke the EAEU Business Council,² which serves as a supplementary tool of the region's economic integration by assuming the responsibilities of a coordinating and advisory body. Its main members are businessmen who not only interact with each other, but also maintain close ties with EAEU institutions (Eurasian Economic Commission, EEC) and national governments. The EAEU Business Council also convenes fora, exhibitions and other types of congresses in order to exchange ideas, establish ties with all interested parties and discuss joint transborder projects in different domains (Stolkov, 2023).

Education and science are therefore becoming increasingly important. In 2022, all EAEU member states established the Eurasian Network University (ENU).³ This project permits to forge interuniversity collaborations and overcome existing obstacles, thereby facilitating the advancement of the member states' educational systems. Moreover, ENU favored new research and exchange programs, with academic mobility being the underpin of its consortium.

Youth cooperation, developed through the Youth Council of the Eurasian Economic Union (established in 2019), also contributes to the promotion of humanitarian ties.⁴ They organize different youth fora that take place on the sidelines of political summits. A special place is reserved for the women's agenda (for example, the Eurasian Women's

Forum, which brings together the most influential female representatives of the region).

These horizontal ties permit to overcome bureaucratic bottlenecks in promoting strategic priorities of regional integration, taking into account different national sentiments. This mixture of traditional and network diplomacy is also conducive to preserving unique political and economic systems, as well as its cultural diversity on the basis of a three-pronged agenda — intergovernmental dialogue, cooperation between states and NGOs and business-to-business (B2B) relations.

Until now, the EAEU's instruments have been designed to search for common ground on which to base the future development of integration. Such a pattern is in high demand in Eurasia, given that the list of Russia's neighbors includes neutral states (namely, Turkmenistan) or those who are fearful of any cooperation on sensible issues.

This gives rise to another distinguishing feature of Russia's network diplomacy in Eurasia, which lies in the fact that Moscow is using flexible platforms of cooperation to promote the concept of a multispeed integration, providing opportunities for cooperation to the extent that individual countries deem appropriate for their national interests (Rakhimov & Azizova, 2021, p. 111). As a result, it leads to both shrinking and deepening of cooperation, since it reduces the number of domains compared to other regional platforms and increases the level of contacts that promote economic ties.

From the very outset of the Eurasian institutions, this feature was something that distinguished them from another still existing platform of regional cooperation, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which is more formalized as an intergovernmental organization. The main premium was put on decentralizing economic processes that gave way to the

² About the EAEU Business Council // Eurasian Economic Commission. (In Russian). URL: <https://eec.eaeunion.org/comission/konsultativnye-organy/o-delovom-sovete-eaes/about-del-sov.php> (accessed: 13.11.2024).

³ Eurasian Network University. (In Russian). URL: <https://enuniversity.org/> (accessed: 13.11.2024).

⁴ Youth Council of the Eurasian Economic Commission // Eurasian Economic Commission. (In Russian). URL: https://eec.eaeunion.org/youth_agenda/council/ (accessed: 13.11.2024).

cooperation of multilayered actors.⁵ This approach was oriented towards expanding economic partnership not only between political powers (national governments), but also between key economic entities (transnational corporations).

Following the initialization of the EAEU as a regional integration structure, the tools of network diplomacy were used for external purposes. In the EAEU, as just in most international organizations, member states expand cooperation both with observers (Moldova, Uzbekistan, Cuba and Iran) and other extra-regional countries, most of which are Russia's trade partners that signed with Moscow either the agreement on free trade zone or other preferential agreements.

By 2024, the EAEU signed agreements on free trade zones with Vietnam (2015), Singapore (2019), Serbia (2019) and Iran (2024), as well as a treaty on trade and economic cooperation with China (2018). Moreover, negotiations are underway with several countries to conclude either former or later type of agreement. Egypt submitted an application in 2015. Since 2016, a dialogue has been launched with Mongolia and Thailand.⁶ Since 2017, a similar process has been initiated with India. In 2019, the Prime Minister of Israel articulated the intention to develop economic contacts with the EAEU within the framework of the free trade agreement.⁷ The development of trade agreements with Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates is currently

underway.⁸ A considerable number of countries from all geographical regions have expressed their interest in specific potential areas of cooperation. These include South and Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, and Pakistan), Latin America (Peru and Chile), the Middle East and North Africa (Syria and Tunisia), and Central Europe (Hungary).⁹

Another characteristic of Russia's network diplomacy in Eurasia consists in the activities of the working groups that bring together governmental experts (not only necessarily diplomats) and representatives of non-state actors. The way how these mechanisms function speaks volumes about the interdependence of the political level, where heads of state make strategic decisions, and the day-to-day level of cooperation. The main advantage of these working groups is that they are run by specialized professionals. Thus, when seeking a solution to a problem, member states discuss not only the political expediency but also the practical utility of the matter in question.

In Eurasia, working groups are widely represented in the main macro-regional and regional organizations (EAEU, CIS, and SCO). Initially, their overarching objective was the development of national economies, but later the scope of their activities expanded considerably. Today, working groups, whose activities are organized in accordance with the principles of network diplomacy, are widely used in the humanitarian field, with the increasing number of civil society representatives and academics engaged in the field of international cooperation.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is developing complementary tools of diplomacy

⁵ Elena Krancheva: "Network Diplomacy Is a Driver of Intensification of Eurasian Economic Cooperation" // Rossiyskaya Gazeta. May 18, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://rg.ru/2022/05/18/elena-krancheva-setevaia-diplomatiia-drajver-intensifikacii-evrazijskogo-ekonomicheskogo-sotrudnichestva.html> (accessed: 13.11.2024).

⁶ Negotiations with Thailand have been temporarily suspended.

⁷ Putin, Netanyahu Agree to Boost Talks on EAEU-Israeli Free Trade Agreement — Lavrov // Bilaterals.org. November 13, 2019. URL: <https://www.bilaterals.org/?putin-netanyahu-agree-to-boost> (accessed: 13.11.2024).

⁸ Trade Agreements of the EAEU // Eurasian Economic Commission. (In Russian). URL: <https://eec.eaeunion.org/comission/departement/dotp/torgovye-soglasheniya/> (accessed: 13.11.2024).

⁹ Integration Trajectories // Review.uz. January 10, 2020. (In Russian). URL: <https://review.uz/post/integracionnye-traektorii> (accessed: 03.12.2024).

in the field of security in order to address new threats and challenges that require the experience and knowledge of specialized practitioners. This principle underlies the activities of the SCO Working Group on Information Warfare (Boyko, 2019, p. 7) and the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure.¹⁰

Taking the SCO Working Group on Information Warfare as an example, it is clear that these supplementary means of network diplomacy appear to be extremely effective in advancing the global priorities of Russian foreign policy.¹¹ From 2009 to 2011, the SCO hosted the negotiations on the “Rules of Conduct in the Internet,” which resulted in the corresponding resolution adopted by member states. In 2011 and 2013, some of the provisions of this initiative formed the basis for the subsequent report of the UN experts, which led to the General Assembly resolution on “Developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security.”¹²

The UN Working Group is undoubtedly aimed at coordinating national approaches and promoting Russian interests in the development of legally binding conventions on countering information crimes. In 2024, the General Assembly adopted the draft of this convention with the reservation that it will be finalized after the adoption of a supplementary protocol defining these

crimes.¹³ Furthermore, the SCO Working Group pays special attention to formulating a unified approach to Internet governance.

The new generation of Russia’s network diplomacy approaches appears to be creating specialized platforms aimed at resolving regional conflicts in Eurasia. This has given Russia an opportunity to advance its role as a guarantor of security. The first precedents were the Minsk Group for the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Mixed Control Commission for the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, the Geneva Discussions on Abkhazia (1993–1994) and the “5+2” negotiations model on Transnistria. After the war in Georgia in 2008, the Geneva Consultations on Security and Stability in the South Caucasus were launched, and the Normandy format was established in the context of the escalation of the Ukraine conflict.

Although not all of these platforms have been effective, and some have merely led to the freezing of the conflicts, with most remaining to this day, the undoubted achievement of these platforms is that they have brought opposing parties and key mediators to the negotiating table. This approach is in line with the official position of the Russian Federation, which is to seek a diplomatic solution to any military conflict. In general, these platforms have been used to conclude preliminary agreements (ceasefire, exchange of prisoners, and withdrawal of troops) that have laid the foundations for further peace process.

Greater Eurasia Partnership as a Flagship Initiative of the Russian Federation

One of the main features of Russia’s network diplomacy in Eurasia is that it is aimed

¹⁰ On the 10th International Scientific and Practical Conference of the RATS SCO // Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. September 16, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://ecrats.org/ru/press/news/12724/> (accessed: 15.11.2024).

¹¹ Letter dated 12 September 2011 from the Permanent Representatives of China, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General // United Nations. September 14, 2011. URL: <https://docs.un.org/ru/A/66/359> (accessed: 05.05.2021).

¹² UN General Assembly Resolution A/73/PV.45 of 5 December 2018 // United Nations. (In Russian). URL: <https://undocs.org/ru/A/RES/73/27> (accessed: 05.05.2024).

¹³ On the Adoption of the UN Convention Against Cybercrime // MFA of Russia. December 26, 2024. (In Russian). URL: https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/un/organs/general_assembly/1989289/ (accessed: 23.12.2024).

at the strategic level of cooperation, absorbing the potential of different actors (nation-states, regional organizations and integration groups), projects and platforms of cooperation. This principle corresponds to the values that Russia promotes in the international arena, seeking to form a single architecture of the Eurasian subsystem of contemporary international relations, which, far from creating dividing lines in the region and acting to contain single countries, would be inclusive and operating in the best interests of all countries.

The overarching project that embodies this inclusive agenda is the Russian initiative of the Greater Eurasia Partnership. In 2015, the Russian President Vladimir Putin in his address to the Parliament formulated the idea of a single integration in Eurasia.¹⁴ In this regard, he proposed to promote cooperation between countries and organizations in the region.

The initiative was dedicated to economic aspects of cooperation, namely, trade, common transport and logistics, cyber economy, and finance. The EAEU is the driving force behind regional integration, establishing ties with extra regional countries through bilateral and multilateral trade agreements. Moreover, the GEP is based on the idea of linking the EAEU and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) together with of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the SCO. In other words, the GEP is based on the complementarity of the countries concerned.¹⁵

¹⁴ The President's Address to the Federal Assembly // President of Russia. December 3, 2015. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50864> (accessed: 13.11.2024).

¹⁵ On the Russian initiative of the Greater Eurasian Partnership // MFA of Russia. March 15, 2023. (In Russian). URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/activity/COORDINATING_AND_ADVISORY_BODY/HEAD_OF_SUBJECTS_COUNCIL/MATERIALY-O-VYPOLNENII-REKOMENDACIJ-ZASEDANIJ-SGS/XXXVI-ZASEDANIE-SGS/1767070/ (accessed: 13.11.2024).

Today the GEP expands its outreach by adding new items on the agenda: politics, security, culture, science and education. Thus, GEP can become a full-fledged instrument of cohesion of Eurasia as a single region.¹⁶

In practice, the GEP initiative has resulted in a number of agreements. Apart from the agreements with individual countries, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the SCO and ASEAN Secretariats in 2005,¹⁷ a similar document was signed between the Eurasian Economic Commission and ASEAN at the Russia — ASEAN Summit in Singapore in 2018,¹⁸ and between the EEC and SCO Secretariats in 2021.¹⁹

In order to harness the support of China as one of the key actors in the region, the GEP is based on the idea of integrating the Chinese BRI (Petrovskiy, 2017, p. 100). The negotiations culminated in the decision to join the EAEU with the BRI, which was further supplemented by the EAEU — China agreement on trade and economic cooperation concluded in 2018. Today, this cooperation is pursued on the

¹⁶ Kortunov A. V. Eight Principles of the Greater Eurasian Partnership // Russian International Affairs Council. September 25, 2020. (In Russian). URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/vosem-printsipov-bolshogo-evraziyskogo-partnerstva/> (accessed: 11.12.2024).

¹⁷ Memorandum of Understanding Between the Secretariat of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO Secretariat) and the Secretariat of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN Secretariat) dated April 21, 2005 // Shanghai Cooperation Organization. (In Russian). URL: <https://rus.sectsc.org/images/07e8/0c/05/1609839.pdf> (accessed: 13.11.2024).

¹⁸ Memorandum of November 14, 2018 “On Mutual Understanding Between the Eurasian Economic Commission and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in the Field of Economic Cooperation” // Alta-Soft. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.alta.ru/tamdoc/18bn0099/> (accessed: 10.10.2024).

¹⁹ Memorandum of September 17, 2021 “Memorandum of September 17, 2021, on Mutual Understanding between the Eurasian Economic Commission and the Secretariat of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization” // Alta-Soft. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.alta.ru/tamdoc/21bn0110/> (accessed: 03.12.2024).

basis of the roadmap adopted in 2023. The undeniable part of any agreement is cooperation in the field of research and technology (Kovalev, 2023).

One of the main areas of cooperation under the GEP is transport and energy. Therefore, it envisages the construction of various infrastructure projects in order to create logistics that would link the Russian Far East and the Asia-Pacific region with Europe. This underlines the rationale behind the increased focus on developing the Central Asian countries as a transit zone. China and Russia are not only working together to accumulate their respective resources for a synergy effect but are also trying to avoid a situation where this region becomes an apple of discord between the two countries (Kovalev, 2023).

Another important aspect of this partnership is the development of northern trade routes, namely the Northern Sea Route, which represents the shortest passage from Europe to Asia, linking Europe and the Far Eastern regions of Russia. The competitive edge of this project lies in the fact that it is twice as short as other existing routes from Europe to China the Suez Canal.²⁰ Moreover, in light of contemporary geopolitical and climatic developments, the role of the Northern Sea Route will not cease to increase. In 2023, the volume of transit cargo will reach an all-time high of 36.2 million tons.²¹

When it comes to logistics that could unite Eurasia, it is important to mention another major route: the North – South corridor linking Russia, India and Iran. The agreement was

signed in 2000 and has since been extended to include Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Syria and other countries in the region. Undoubtedly, the pace of coming to agreement was accelerated by the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea signed in 2018. The main advantage of this route is that it is 2.5 times shorter than the existing trade route, which provides all the companies concerned with the opportunity to economize.

No less promising in terms of further developments of transport and pipelines appears to be Azov, the Black Sea region, the Baltic states and the Murmansk region of Russia. Despite the sanctions, these territories remain lucrative for many Russian and foreign companies, which would have a positive impact on the overall interaction in Eurasia.

Although the GEP appears to be a purely economic project, its political dimension shouldn't be overlooked. This initiative is regarded as a tool for promoting a multipolar world order by engaging all interested countries of the region. At the same time, this Partnership is not anti-Western in nature, which is in contrast to many other military alliances or exclusive formats of cooperation. Nevertheless, the GEP is also concerned with security, which implies not only preventive diplomacy in regard to interstate wars or arms races, but also tools to counter new threats and challenges (separatism, religious extremism, global terrorism). The SCO and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, which serve as regional platforms for multilateral dialogue, are the main nexus of these developments.

The importance of the GEP as a means of network diplomacy is epitomized by the fact that it is aimed at a concerted (involving both state and non-state actors) search for global issues, namely, climate change, pandemics, food and energy security, forced migration. In this respect, the GEP evokes the image of a universal international organization.

²⁰ Water Area of the Northern Sea Route // Federal State Budgetary Institution "Information Analytical and Statistical Center of Rosmorrechflot". (In Russian). URL: http://www.nsra.ru/ru/ofitsialnaya_informatsiya/granici_smp.html (accessed: 13.11.2024).

²¹ Northern Sea Route // Official Website of the Plenipotentiary Representative of the President of the Russian Federation in the Far Eastern Federal District. (In Russian). URL: <http://dfo.gov.ru/project/econom/seaway/#:~:text=> (accessed: 13.11.2024).

In addition to the above-mentioned avenues of cooperation, the GEP is also aimed at a social and humanitarian agenda in order to promote academic mobility on the basis of network universities of the CIS, EAEU, SCO, and BRICS. It is a whole range of different cultural events — exchange programs, exhibitions, soirees, theatre visits, film premieres, etc.

As the GEP is promoted by means of network diplomacy, Russia is using its sharpest tool in the shed — congress diplomacy, which is why the Greater Eurasian Partnership is one of the main themes of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum and the Eastern Economic Forum.²² Held annually, these events bring together political leaders (heads of state, heads of government, high-ranking officials) of Russia and other states, as well as businesses, diplomatic corps, renowned experts, which favor the implementation of the political agreement.

Conclusion

The development of Russia's network diplomacy in Eurasia was unfolding amid its strategy to expand its presence, with platforms and institutions of network cooperation acting as an auxiliary track of the traditional diplomacy. Given the multilayered characteristic of the Russian foreign diplomacy, Eurasia is the most striking example of a multivariant combination of various forms of network diplomacy of the Russian Federation, ranging from narrowly focused working groups addressing specific tasks to universal platforms in terms of thematic coverage.

The distinctive feature of Russia's network diplomacy in Eurasia is that it was used

at the very beginning of the integration project in the region. More specifically, horizontal elements of network interaction were used immediately before and soon after the establishment of the EAEU, which in turn created economic ties that were crucial for the common economic space and later laid the foundation for the Customs Union. At the same time, the idea of “multi-speed integration” was emphasized, taking into account the different degrees of readiness of individual countries to cooperate.

With the rise of Russia's influence in the region, the list of the areas of cooperation expanded from purely economic and trade relations to security, culture and humanitarian assistance. In order to advance this agenda, the countries used the soft means of network diplomacy, namely flexible working groups that bring together government officials, businessmen, academics and other interested parties. Network diplomacy has facilitated the development of the external relations of the EAEU (through free trade zones with individual countries) and the SCO (through joint events).

The distinguishing feature of Russia's network diplomacy in Eurasia is the use of a modern instrument of network interaction — the Greater Eurasian Partnership, which aims to consolidate the potential of all interested countries that share the same view of the global order, regional multilateral institutions (the EEU, SCO and ASEAN) and other initiatives (e.g. China's Belt and Road Initiative). This approach prevents the decentralization of the region into opposing alliances and blocs aimed at containing individual countries, favoring the engagement of an increasing number of participants (nation-states, macro-regional platforms, integration groups) and extra-regional actors and thus promoting the unification.

All in all, the prospects of the GEP, from economic partnership to social and humanitarian ties, are very promising.

²² On the Russian initiative of the Greater Eurasian Partnership // MFA of Russia. March 15, 2023. (In Russian). URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/activity/COORDINATING_AND_ADVISORY_BODY/HEAD_OF_SUBJECTS_COUNCIL/MATERIALY-O-VYPOLNENII-REKOMENDACIJ-ZASEDANIJ-SGS/XXXVI-ZASEDANIE-SGS/1767070/ (accessed: 13.11.2024).

Individual projects require a more profound approach to searching mechanisms of their implementation from organizational and financial points of view, taking into consideration a complex landscape of the Eurasian continent, so the focus on integration of potentials of all regional participants serves as a prerequisite for this project. Moreover, the undeniable benefit of the GEP consists in the fact that this project plays the role of the channel of dialogue with partners beyond Eurasia, first and foremost, integrations and individual countries of the Islamic world and Africa. Consequently, the GEP has every chance to become not only the main integration structure of the region, but also a complementary mechanism of Russia's global network diplomacy, underpinning other platforms such as the BRICS.

In this regard, it might be reasonable to promote not only political dialogue through diplomatic channels at bilateral and multilateral levels, but also complementary tracks with experts among former politicians, economists, cultural figures, academics, security studies professors, etc. The platforms for preserving these ties already exist in the form of different fora and conferences. At the same time, this work might appear insufficient to form robust ties. One should render these activities more systematic by creating websites for promoting common project of cooperation. Apart from the interconnectedness of Eurasia, this could improve the image of the region as a new center of gravity in the contemporary system of international relations.

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