



CENTRAL ASIA May 2019

Eurasian Media Forum: discussing regional integration or cooperation

Regional cooperation in Central Asia was the main topic of the round table that officially opened the XVI Eurasian Media Forum in Almaty (22-24 May), directly followed by the author.

More than one hundred delegates, academics, journalists attended the Forum, scheduled two weeks before the presidential elections, that legitimized the successor of the *Elbasy* (leader of the nation) Nursultan Nazarbayev, who resigned in March 2019.

It was interesting to observe that the debate strictly reflected foreign policy's different orientations and positions supported by Central Asian countries and by external actors, namely Russia. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan strongly support regional cooperation in the political and economic sphere, appearing ready to take the leadership of the whole region, while Russian expert Tatiana Valovaya (who serves on the board of the Eurasian Economic Commission) clearly stated that regional cooperation is already existing and ongoing in the form of the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). As in the security field, Russia hopes that Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (together with Tajikistan, a member of the CSTO-Collective Security Treaty Organization refusing to join EAE) could become members of the Eurasian Economic Union.

For Central Asian countries, regional cooperation is not conceived as regional integration, but as the improvement of bilateral and multilateral relations, based on mutual trust, in order to achieve common benefits, resolve disputes and avoid controversies. The Kazakh diplomat Kairat Abuseitov used an evocative formula to describe cooperation among Central Asian countries, which should operate as "the five fingers of the hand", becoming an attractive regional pole for foreign investments, even if will require to promote an "*Eurasian continental thinking*". Furthermore, he proposed to develop the agricultural sector by building an integrated regional system within which countries would allocate their production (wheat from Kazakhstan, cotton from Uzbekistan), becoming a leader in the agro-food sector.

Central Asian countries have expressed a positive evaluation of China's Belt and Road Initiative-BRI, generally considered as an efficient tool to promote regional integration of transport infrastructures.

In fact, Arslan Ashirov Gurbanmammedovich, Deputy Chairman of Turkmenistan's State News Agency (TDH) stressed that the geographic centrality of Turkmenistan as a bridge between Europe and Asia will contribute to improve regional cooperation and interconnectivity, through the development of BRI-labelled railway projects such as China-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman corridor or Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Romania.

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