

# **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

## **The Dynamics of Central Asian regionalism: Ideas matter**

**By**

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The first wave of Central Asian regionalism (1990-2005) has been characterized as ‘failed’, a ‘talk shop’, ‘ink on paper’, ‘structurally built-in competition’ and ‘pathologically non-cooperative. Scholars lost enthusiasm in studying the region until the regime transition in Uzbekistan in 2016. The second wave of Central Asian regionalism launched with the coming to power of a new Uzbek leader, Shafkat Mirziyoyev, and with the large-scale reforms he initiated in Uzbekistan. The new presidential office put in place cooperation and integration processes with neighboring countries as a key priority of Tashkent’s foreign policy. This event led policy makers

and the epistemic community to bring the study of Central Asian regionalism back to the table again.

The first Consultative Meeting of the Heads of all five Central Asian countries that was held in Astana (currently Nur-Sultan) in March 2018 left scholars with many contested questions:

‘Return to Turkestan? Central Asia in search of regional identity’ ‘Is this Central Asia’s ASEAN moment?’; ‘Central Asia after Astana: From integration to cooperation?’; ‘Can Central Asia be integrated as Visegrad?’; ‘Rising regionalism: A new trend or an old idea in need of better understanding?’

The fundamental purpose of the thesis is to understand why the earlier regional initiatives failed and what the current regional approaches are. Being the first study in the literature to employ a realist constructivism theory to study the region, this thesis argues that reading Central Asian regionalism from the rationalist perspective with its pre-given premises is not sufficient to understand it. Thus, one should consider ideational factors seriously. The thesis advances two agendas: first, it suggests to reconceptualize the region as ‘Central Asian regionalism’, rather than ‘Central Asian integration’ and, second, it invites switching the focus from a functional aspect to an ideational (ideas, visions, and imaginations) aspect of regionalism. Ideas of Central Asian regionalism reveal much more than is usually thought about in the region.