Eurasian Regionalism: Ideas and Practices

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Introduction

Following the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991, Russia emerged as the largest and most powerful of the newly-independent post-Soviet states (NIS). Its post-communist leaders initially appeared keen on shedding the vestiges of the ‘empire’: getting rid of what was perceived as unproductive subsidies to other NIS. However, the effects of the dissolution, specifically the breakage of the unified economic complex of the former Soviet Union, were no less harmful to the Russian national interests than they were to the national interests of smaller NIS. Transition to a new type of political and economic relations between these states had to be managed on a new, multilateral basis. Such a transition mechanism had been proposed in the form of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), still centred on Russia as an internationally recognized legal successor to the Soviet Union. The CIS started a process of regional (re)integration on a new, post-communist and post-hegemonic basis.

Creation of the CIS, together with its Interstate Economic Committee (1994–1999), Inter-Parliamentary Assembly and a set of preferential trade agreements from the very beginning carried a promise of moving way beyond the initial stage of a civilized break-up and distribution of assets between the constituent republics of the former USSR. While declaring legal norms of the former Soviet Union null and void, the agreement on the establishment of the CIS committed the parties to the development of cooperation in politics, economics, culture and education; coordination of foreign policy; and cooperation in the formation and development of ‘all-European and Eurasian markets’ (Art. 7). Apart from Russia, Armenia, Belarus and the Central Asian states, Kazakhstan in particular appeared most enthusiastic about the CIS project and economic reintegration of the NIS, generally speaking.

The very first CIS customs union was created in 1994 by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. It was Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev who proposed the establishment of the Eurasian Union of States. The draft document entitled ‘Establishment of a Eurasian Union of States’ was officially submitted to the Heads of State of the Commonwealth of Independent States in June 1994 and distributed at the Forty-ninth session of the UN General Assembly the following month. However, the idea could only come to fruition with Russia’s coming on board and leading the process that got the name of the Eurasian regional integration.

The ‘Eurasian’ label draws upon the tradition of Russian émigré thinkers of the early 20th century, who posited the existence of the specifically ‘Eurasian’ core to the Old World continent, which is neither Europe nor Asia as such, but represents the ‘Old World’s centre’, the continental ‘torso’ of the Eurasian landmass, consisting mainly of its three largest plains – East European (Russian), West Siberian, and Central Asian – and their adjacent peripheries to the east. This Eurasia proper, *Eurasia sensu stricto*, is to be differentiated from the classic geographic concept of a continent spanning both Europe and Asia in their entirety, *Eurasia sensu latiore*.

The idea of the continental ‘trunk’, which bears an uncanny resemblance to Halford Mackinder’s (1904) Heartland, has carried weighty geopolitical implications: a historical mission of Eurasia proper, according to classic Eurasianists, was to be a unifier of the entire continent, the true ‘middle’ world bridging both European and Asian ‘peripheries of the Old World’. Thus understood, Eurasia has been perceived as a naturally integrated entity predestined to remain whole and indivisible: in one formulation, ‘the nature of the Eurasian world is least conducive to ‘separatisms’ of any kind – whether political, cultural or economic’ (Savitskii, 2007, p. 247).

Historically, Eurasianism as a concept connoted a modernized, post-monarchical version of Russian imperialism and multicultural, state-based nationalism. Some of the echoes of this reading still persist. However, the resurrection of the idea in the form of the Eurasian regional integration in the late 20th and early 21st century has had nothing to do with the desire to recreate the behemoth state covering one-sixth of the world’s landmass. Eurasian regional integration today is about voluntary processes of predominantly economic cooperation. With economic cooperation at its core, it also engages social, political, administrative, regulatory and normative exchanges indicative of multifaceted coordination of governance among several post-communist states from Belarus to Tajikistan.

Regional integration in the post-Soviet Eurasia parallels similar developments elsewhere in the world. This new regionalism represents, worldwide, not only an adaptive reaction to economic challenges, security dilemmas, uncertainties and risks of the global age, but also a new way to ‘go global’. The new regionalism (NR) scholars (Breslin, Hughes, Phillips & Rosamond, 2002; Söderbaum & Shaw, 2003) see the object of their studies as a complex process that goes beyond economics to engage cultural, political, and security aspects of life of the societies involved. The two aspects of this process are the structure and the agency: the objectively given political–geographic determinants of a region in the making and the forces that are giving new quality to these objectively given structures. The agency aspect of the process is represented by foreign policies of the participating states that zero in on a ‘strategic goal of region-building, of establishing regional coherence and identity’ (Farrell, 2005: 8).

Post-communist regionalism is a novel object to study. It may be included in the so-called ‘third wave’ of regionalisms around the world, distinguished from both the first ‘wave’, which is usually associated with closed regional trade arrangements and import substitution strategies, and the ‘second wave’, sometimes referred to as ‘open regionalism’, which emphasized regional integration compatible with non-discriminatory trade liberalization and openness to the outsiders. In this scheme, the ‘third wave’ represents an attempt at selective, negotiated openness and resuscitation of traditional preferential trade agreements – the process that has gained momentum in response to the global financial crises of the last two decades (Bonapace, 2005).

However, there are also analysts who believe that there are only two – old and new – varieties of regionalism, with the latter propelled to life by the GATT/WTO apparent incapacity to resolve old-standing trade issues, as well as by the initial successes of the Single European Market and the US embrace of regional integration in the Americas Regionalization efforts in Eurasia have been undoubtedly informed by the narrative and institutional diffusion of regionalist concepts transplanted from the European integration discourse. At the same time, conceptual borrowing could not but be affected by the collapse of the neo-liberal model of globalization in the 2008–2009 meltdown and the ensuing protracted recession of the Eurozone. These events gave a new boost to Russia’s own advocacy of both regional and cross-regional alternatives to neo-liberalism (Plummer, 2009; Lavrov, 2011).

The CIS evolution

Re-integration of a collapsed multinational federation on a voluntary basis, no longer in a state form but as a region comprising several newly-independent states, is a task that is principally different from a typical region-building exercise. Historically, territorially adjacent states banded together to facilitate free trade and security cooperation. The sovereignty of these states was never in question; rather, formal institutionalization of regional arrangements was seen as a natural result of the development and maturation of pre-existing intra-regional exchanges. Establishment of a region was seen by all participant states as an instrument of further promotion of state sovereignty: a solution to potential international conflicts that might arise inside or outside the regionalizing grouping; a vehicle to promote and expand national exports; or, perhaps, an opportunity to voice some ‘pan’ identity claim out of pre-existing ties of ethnic, religious, historical or territorial solidarity.

At the CIS 20th anniversary the heads of the member states adopted a Declaration, which lauded the Commonwealth as an ‘authoritative regional interstate organization’ that created necessary ‘conditions for steady development of the mutually beneficial cooperation in the national interests of each of the CIS member states’ (CIS, 2011). Such an optimistic assessment should be taken with a grain of salt. The CIS agreements expressed good intentions, but did little to ensure coordination and compliance with adopted decisions. In early 2012, the CIS boasted 1,925 signed multilateral documents, yet the average rate of their implementation at the national level, according to the research done by the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation (2009) stood at 55–56%, starting with a low of 7% for Turkmenistan and 14% for Georgia. The non-implementation led to several rounds of organizational ‘taking stock,’ resulting in the dumping of 30% of the signed documents cumulatively by the time the CIS was to celebrate its twentieth birthday (CIS Executive Committee, nd).

Moscow pinned the blame on its partners’ non-compliance. Smaller states blamed Russia’s self-centredness and the propensity to impose its preferences on others. Several of them were concerned over the presence of Russian troops on their territory. Moscow was slow to close Russian military bases abroad, while advocating the CIS transformation into a political–military union. Bureaucratization, incoherence and the lack of meaningful cooperation between the CIS bodies and the national institutions of member states contributed to the widespread perception of impasse and institutional ineffectiveness.

Instead of growing into a tight union with coordinated trade, security, monetary and economic policies, the CIS shaped out as a loose consultative forum, an instrument of a ‘civilized divorce’, in a memorable pronouncement by Ukraine’s first President Leonid Kravchuk. Annual summits became increasingly shallow, while the working groups made scant progress on key issues of contention. On several occasions, leaders of such states as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan failed to show up for the meetings. Downgrading delegations from the head-of-state level to that of the head of government (and lower) levels became routine. After the Russian–Georgian war of 2008, Georgia officially quit the organization. The speaker of Ukraine’s parliament promised to resolve the question of Ukraine’s leaving the CIS by the end of the winter 2015 session.

In spite of this thorny road, the CIS did not collapse and continued providing venues for interstate negotiations and regular meetings of the heads of state, heads of government, ministers of foreign affairs and, for the eight members, of defence. It coordinated legislative and regulatory acts, maintained energy flows, created common markets in agriculture, transportation and information technologies, and facilitated security cooperation, which included a unified system of air defence. It sponsored a number of specialized agencies, such as the Antiterrorist Centre, the Interstate Bank, and the Electric Energy Council; the interstate councils on emergency situations, anti-monopoly policy, aviation and air space use; the Council of the Heads of Customs Services and so on. Cooperation in science and information exchange produced the International Association of the Academies of Sciences, the Interstate Foundation for Humanitarian Cooperation, the Council for Cooperation in Science, Technology and Innovations, the Hydro-meteorological Network, and the Interstate Statistical Committee, among others.

The CIS peacekeepers helped to freeze several conflicts in the post-Soviet space and played a decisive role in putting an end to the protracted civil war in Tajikistan. In most cases, the CIS served as a useful shell for the cooperation of border guards, security services, police and judicial institutions, as well as defence establishments of the member states. It is hard to overestimate the fact that the Commonwealth opened doors for virtually unrestricted flows of people across the national borders, helped slow down deterioration of common cultural space, and provided room for information exchanges, people’s diplomacy and expansion of business ties.

In addition, economic cooperation within the framework of the CIS, notwithstanding the inevitable growth of trade with advanced industrialized countries, allowed not only to preserve essential trade ties, but also to prepare conditions for regeneration of the mutual trade turnover in the future. New interstate projects in nuclear energy, transportation, space industry, health care and information technologies are under way. The Russian Federation is one of the top ten investors in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Tajikistan and Ukraine. The Free Trade Agreement of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which entered into force initially between Russia, Ukraine and Belarus on 20 September 2012, now includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. The CIS scorecard is not perfect, yet, representing it bluntly as a failure (Kubicek, 2009) is hardly unproblematic.

The Eurasian Economic Community

To speed up formation of a customs union and single economic space, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan launched the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), whose purpose Lukashenko identified as ‘the effective utilization of the five nations’ economic potentials for the advancement of the living standards of the peoples’ (Lukashenko, 2004). The organization’s Secretary General Grigorii Rapota advocated ‘creation of a trade bridge between the East and the West’ (Kazakhstan Today, 20 April 2007). In 2006, the EurAsEC expanded to include Uzbekistan. However, two years later Tashkent chose to suspend its participation. Armenia, Moldova, and Ukraine were given an observer status.

The EurAsEC proved more successful in facilitating trade among its members than the CIS. If trade turnover among the CIS member states grew threefold in 2000–2010, internal trade turnover of the EurAsEC countries increased more than four times in 2000–2008 (Mansurov, 2010). Between 2001 and 2010, the gross domestic product of the member states grew, on average, 1.6 times, industrial production increased 1.5 times, and the volume of fixed investment – 2.2 times (Mansurov, 2011). In 2009, the Interstate Council of the EurAsEC established a regional Anti-crisis Fund and the Centre for High Technologies. The Anti-crisis Fund proved useful in alleviating consequences of the global financial crisis of 2008–2009.

With EurAsEC moving decisively as the preferred vehicle for economic integration in the region, Nazarbayev advocated the creation of a regional development bank. Vladimir Putin supported the initiative, and the Eurasian Development Bank was founded in January 2006. Sensing new opportunities, several non-governmental business associations in Russia were keen to jump on the bandwagon. In 2008, the EurAsEC Integration Committee, the Russian Chamber of Industry and Trade, the Russian Alliance of Manufacturers and Businesspeople, and the Association of Financial and Industrial Groups of Russia sponsored the creation of the Eurasian Business Council ‘to foster the development of trade and economic co-operation between EurAsEC countries, establish direct links between companies from these countries, and encourage business circles to assist integration in EurAsEC’ (Eurasian Development Bank, 2009). A well-known businessman with interests in the primary metals sector, the former first deputy prime minister of Kazakhstan and, later, first deputy prime minister of Russia (in Yeltsin’s government) Oleg Soskovets became the head of its Coordination Council.

The first decade of the EurAsEC existence was generally successful and saw real progress toward the deepening of economic and regulatory integration. Seeking to build further on these achievements, three leading member states of the EurAsEC – Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus – decided to move on to the next phase of integration and realize the already agreed-upon measures for the creation of a functioning Customs Union. The idea of a multilevel, multispeed integration, first realized in Europe, dictated an equally cautious, gradualist approach to integration in Eurasia. An agreement on the formation of the unified customs territory was signed in 2007, yet negotiations over technical issues went on for two more years.

The Commission of the Customs Union began its work in January 2009. It coordinated preparation of documents necessary to lay down a legal foundation for the new entity. On 9 June 2009, Vladimir Putin announced that Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan would be joining the WTO together as a customs union. That union officially came into existence on 1 January 2010. The same day the newly-formed organization promulgated a common external tariff and non-tariff regulations based on the agreed-upon list of goods whose import/export was to be regulated supranationally. The Treaty on the Customs Code of the Customs Union went into effect from 1 July 2010. By July next year, the transfer of customs controls to the external borders was accomplished, with full abolition of customs clearance for the goods moving between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus and intended for domestic consumption. In 2012 the Eurasian Community’s Court of Justice started functioning. It has been given international commercial arbitration powers with relation to the disputes emerging in the framework of the Customs Union and among the EurAsEC member states.

On 1 January 2015 the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) officially came into existence. The Customs Union and the Single Economic Space expanded with the addition of Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. Armenia had also acceded to the Eurasian Economic Union, and a road map for Kyrgyzstan’s accession as a full member was adopted. The EurAsEC ceased to exist, while some of its more viable institutions have been inherited by the Eurasian Union. Depressed oil prices and the sanctions that Russia incurred over the conflict in Ukraine led intra-regional trade to contract by 6.5% in 2013 and by a further 10% in 2014. Nonetheless, the Russian Ambassador to the EU has been upbeat on the Eurasian Union’s future, arguing that ‘the costs of establishing an economic union comprising more than 180 million consumers with total GDP of more than 2.4 trillion USD are worth incurring’ (Chizhov, 2015).

CSTO

In addition to a number of economic initiatives, Russia has also spearheaded defence cooperation and the formation of a regional security community. The primary drivers for the creation of the would-be alliance were NATO’s enlargement to the east and the threat of militant Islam, which was acutely felt in Eurasia’s southern ‘underbelly’. The Tashkent Treaty on Collective Security (CST) was signed in 1992 by Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Belarus joined a year later. Russia’s defence planners focused on counterterrorism, border security, military cooperation and the protection of regional stability, national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the participant states. The Central Asian participants were especially concerned with the rise of political Islam and externally induced challenges to the established post-communist regimes. The containment of the ongoing civil conflicts in Tajikistan and Georgia and the cessation of hostilities in the Nagorno-Karabakh area of southern Caucasus required immediate attention and cooperation of all neighbouring states. Finally, no single state could effectively deal with the problem of transnationally organized criminal groups engaged in drugs and human trafficking, which acquired colossal proportions with the entrenchment of the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

The first ten years of the CST treaty brought mixed results. As expectations of using the collective security provisions of the CST for stopping the internal (Georgia) and external (Azerbaijan) conflicts were not realized, these two states left the Treaty in 1999. So did the Republic of Uzbekistan, whose leaders felt that the country was abandoned, by Russia in particular, to face the threat of the cross-border spillover of militant Islam from Tajikistan and Afghanistan on its own. It became obvious that further institutionalization of defence and security cooperation was long overdue. In 2000, the CIS opened the Anti-Terrorist Centre in Moscow, and a year later – its branch in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Next year, Russia promulgated the creation of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Its founding members – Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan – agreed to intensify regional coordination of efforts in order to meet new security challenges of the post-9/11 world.

The CSTO’s first successful operation ‘Kanal’ (Canal) was launched in 2003 and aimed to pre-empt drug trafficking from Afghanistan across the Central Asian borders. In ten years, the annual Kanal campaigns succeeded in seizing hundreds of tons of drugs, which would qualify this international collaborative effort as one of the largest and most effective operations against illicit trafficking of narcotics in the world.

In 2005 the CSTO Collective Security Council adopted a decision to establish the Interstate commission on military–economic cooperation. The main vehicle of military–economic cooperation in the CSTO framework is the preferential pricing of Russia’s supplies of arms and ammunition to its partners. This mechanism, which allows other CSTO members to buy Russian weaponry and supplies for prices equal to domestic, started working in February 2006.

In the same year, after the bloody suppression of the uprising in Andijan and the subsequent fallout with the USA, Uzbekistan chose to re-join the CSTO. Yet, disagreements between Tashkent, on the one side, and Moscow and Minsk, on the other, led Uzbekistan to suspend its membership in June 2012. The prevalent view in Tashkent at the time was dominated by concerns that CSTO membership could be used to bring Uzbek national troops into a third-country conflict against that country’s wishes and the best understanding of Uzbek national interests.[[1]](#endnote-1) However, the CSTO Statute proclaims that the decision to deploy troops will always be collective and consensus-based, and can only follow an official request of a member state inviting peacekeepers to settle a conflict on its own territory. Thus, the occasional fear-mongering notwithstanding, the CSTO forces will never be deployed to help Armenia settle a conflict with Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh: only a direct aggression against Armenia itself might necessitate such intervention (Rustamov, 2012).

In ten years the CSTO grew into an organization with its own budget, secretariat, central staff, peacekeepers, Collective Rapid Deployment Force (KSBR) and the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces (KSOR). In addition to KSBR and KSOR, it currently has two regional groups of forces at its disposal, the Russia–Belarus and the Russia–Armenia groupings. By 2013 the KSBR for the Central Asian region consisted of ten battalions and stood at about 4,500 troops, while the KSOR forces grew to 22,000 troops by 2015. The rapid reaction and rapid deployment forces are trained to combat terrorism, organized crime and drug trafficking, and to deal with emergency situations. They may be also used for peacekeeping and counter-insurgency activities. The CSTO holds regular military exercises, conferences and training, and carries out joint operations within its broader mandate of the strengthening of peace, international and regional security and stability.

The Kremlin views the CSTO as ‘a key instrument to maintain stability and ensure security’ in its ‘zone of responsibility and adjacent regions’ (Foreign Policy Concept, 2013). While international observers occasionally present the CSTO as ‘a small scale analogue to NATO’ (Mankoff, 2012, p. 162), the organization protests such characterization. ‘NATO is a military bloc seeking a global role,’ said CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha. ‘The military factor is not the foremost one in the activities of the CSTO’ (Novosti SNG, 2008). Even though the organization would like to position itself as a regional security guarantor, it did not intervene to stop a bloody uprising that toppled Kurmanbek Bakiyev’s regime in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, and refused to grant the new government’s request for peacekeepers to deal with ethnic riots in the southern Osh and Jalalabad regions. These failures led member states to revise the founding documents of the CSTO to enter changes that would allow deployment of collective forces not only in response to aggression from outside, but also to suppress internal rioting or uprisings that might endanger the internal stability of a member state (Bordyuzha, 2011).

The CSTO’s regional relevance will be tested in the years following the complete withdrawal of the US and NATO troops from Afghanistan. Critics charge that the CSTO lacks clear ideology and looks more like a club for the preservation of authoritarian regimes, rather than a security organization genuinely concerned about developing effective partnerships with other alliances or finding collective solutions to common problems. As an Uzbek analyst argued, ‘given the mostly Russia-centric nature of the CIS and CSTO, security and integration in the post-Soviet space still cannot be regarded as a genuinely multilateral endeavour’ (Tolipov, 2012). Moreover, the organization has not shown itself in any way when it was needed, as in the chaotic power transition in Kyrgyzstan, a conflict on the Kyrgyz–Uzbek border and, most recently, during the 2014 border clashes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The CSTO is often criticized as toothless, useless, half dead and half alive and so on. Until and unless it proves itself in practice, for example, in the series of operations to block heroin trafficking from Afghanistan, or through effective confidence-building measures along the borders of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, or via concrete and productive involvement into the volatile Ferghana Valley region, the organization’s mandate and relevance will remain open to question.

Since October 2010, senior executives of the CIS, CSTO, EurAsEC and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) administrative structures, coordinate their work on a regular basis, meeting annually. During their November 2011 meeting, senior administrators reached an agreement on further coordination of regional integration efforts of their respective organizations and hailed the launch of the Single Economic Space of Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan. The 2013 summit was dominated by the discussion of Afghanistan and Syria. The December 2014 summit has authorized the creation of the CSTO collective air force and a joint air defence system, discussed the situation in Ukraine and the Middle East, and committed the organization to help Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan implement new border security measures in the wake of the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the criticism of the organization as a ‘virtual, rather than real’ structure persisted (Mukhin, 2014).

Eurasian regionalism as a neo-hegemonist project

The tug-of-war between Russia and the European Union over Ukraine has underscored the dilemma of regional integration in Eurasia: how to ensure true political and economic cooperation in the region that was once subject to Russia’s imperial domination without provoking fears of weaker neighbours.

Ukraine has long tried to ride two horses moving in different directions, betting on continued cooperation with Russia, while moving closer and closer to association with the EU and NATO. When the EU refused to deal with the Russia-led Customs Union as a single entity and dashed Kiev’s hopes of having the best of both worlds simultaneously, Ukraine was forced to make a choice, and eventually chose affiliation with the EU.

Russia responded, first, by giving Ukraine the taste of less favourable customs regulations in the summer of 2013 and then, with the speedy annexation of the Crimea. According to the Ukrainian position, this leaves no doubt that the idea of a Eurasian regional integration was Russia’s neo-hegemonist ploy from the very beginning.[[2]](#endnote-2)

However, this interpretation is inaccurate. It is important to remember now that Russia was quite hesitant to lead the regional integration processes in the post-communist Eurasia throughout the nineties. Its support of integration in the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States, as well as the Russia–Belarus Union, has been lukewarm and contributed to the CIS’s ineffectiveness. When, in the first decade after the disbandment of the Soviet Union, sociological surveys showed people’s preferences for reintegration, elites in Moscow were more concerned with jockeying for positions and property in Russia proper. Former Soviet republics were perceived as supplicants for subsidies and protection: an unwanted burden, not an asset. Nazarbayev’s appeals for substantial integration, inclusive with the supranational pooling of sovereignty, fell on deaf ears. Kazakhstan’s 1994 proposal to establish the Eurasian Economic Union was pretty much ignored in Moscow.

The situation changed with Putin’s ascent to power. The elites were now ready to see the ‘near abroad’ as an asset, a potential source of benefits that only regional cooperation could deliver. Perhaps, the change of heart was brought about by several years of continuous pro-integration pressure from below or, perhaps, the newly-formed classes of the rich and super-rich sensed potentially lucrative economic opportunities across the border. In any case, in little more than 15 years the idea of the Eurasian Union had travelled from Central Asia to the Russian capital and became the core of Putin’s re-election platform. One can argue that Russia’s eventual decision to ‘supply’ leadership of regional integration projects in the post-Soviet space was in no small part driven by a pre-existing social ‘demand’ (see also, Masciulli, Molchanov & Knight, 2009, p. 7).

By the mid-2010s, however, the moods of the general public shifted. The new generation, born and raised in the post-Soviet period, no longer perceives Russia as either a natural or necessarily privileged partner. Businesses learned to trade with the far abroad and established relationships that no longer rely on mediation by Moscow. Convincing them that the Eurasian Union makes economic sense takes time and energy. Most importantly, it will take repeated positive experiences of mutually beneficial cooperation. In purely economic terms, this work has only just begun. In terms of international politics, the annexation of Crimea and the situation in the east of Ukraine make it very hard for Moscow to dispel that negative impression of a regional economic integration in Eurasia that favours Russia, that was first formulated, with a bluntness rather uncharacteristic for a diplomat, by Hillary Clinton: ‘a move to re-Sovietize the region’ (Klapper, 2012). Even while no one would imagine Putin’s restoring the Soviet-era institutions as such, the ostensibly ‘voluntary reunification’ of Crimea with Russia might only be read as an example of the imperial creep. Such a move unquestionably does great disservice to the idea of mutually beneficial regional cooperation in Eurasia.

In most cases, the post-Soviet regionalization ‘from above’ reflects a desire to find an optimal balance between security and development. When Russia becomes genuinely committed to the process, even if motivated by a desire to expand its regional influence, it tends to contribute positively to the development of multilateral political and economic ties, freezes conflicts and advances mutually acceptable ways of coexistence. When regional cooperation fails, results can be disastrous, as shown by the intervention in Ukraine, the Russo–Georgian hostilities of 2008 or the 2010 riots in Kyrgyzstan.

Some scholars question the ability of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states to limit sovereignty for the sake of regional integration. According to this line of thought, only democracies presiding over fully operational market economies can successfully implement a regional integration project. Authoritarian regimes must be reluctant to enter into regional integration agreements that limit their freedom of manoeuvre and reduce the rents they can provide to supporters (Mansfield, Milner & Pevehouse, 2008).

However, numerous regional integration arrangements around the globe are being implemented by less than fully democratic governments that sit atop more or less intrusively regulated, distorted, imperfect and only partially open economies. These regimes routinely deal with, and bow to, external demands and conditions advanced by the regional bodies of states. Various impositions on sovereignty, which such a country would not take from the world’s great powers, get accepted if they come from a regional body of peers. It has been noted in this regard that regional integration could conceivably evolve out of ‘cooperation between stable and predictable autocracies, as well as democracies’ (Schmitter & Kim, 2008, p. 28).

It seems unfair to dismiss the already functioning Customs Union of five post-Soviet states (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia) or the emerging Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) with its executive institution, the Eurasian Economic Commission, operating since July 2012 under the principle of consensus, as a crude disguise for Russia’s regional hegemony.[[3]](#endnote-3) Both negotiations over the EAEU treaty and the current disagreements between member states over potential responses to the crisis in Ukraine show that all participants of the EAEU maintain a good measure of decision-making independence (cf. Libman 2015). As far as Russia’s strategy goes, ensuring survival of friendly regimes should not be confused with a desire to dominate those regimes, hence bear full responsibility for the countries in question. These are two very different policy goals. There is no evidence that the Kremlin is prepared to control its Eurasian partners in a Soviet fashion.

Those who describe Russia’s role in regional integration in Eurasia as a ‘quasi-imperialist agenda in the post-Soviet space’ (Cohen, 2013) tend to overestimate Russia’s reach and underestimate the power and resilience of its partners. There is little wonder that Russia’s expedition in the Crimea and support for separatists in Donbass heightened concerns about regional security. Yet, regional security threats are also best addressed by cooperative efforts on a regional basis. Ukraine’s predicament has been made difficult precisely by the fact that it is not yet integrated into either European or Eurasian regional security complexes. Having sat on the fence between the two for far too long, it has emerged on the outside of two regional formations that are now literally taking it apart.

Kazakhstan has avoided similar problems, since its own version of foreign policy multivectorism has from the very beginning positioned the country as a reliable political and economic partner with not just Russia, but China and the West. Reliability and predictability of Kazakhstan’s domestic and foreign policies proved the best defence for the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. In President Nazarbayev’s (2014) words, the main difference between Kazakhstan and Ukraine lies precisely in the fact that Kazakhstan was able to avoid ‘zigzags and reverse movements’ in its strategic orientation and has always maintained the reputation of ‘a trustworthy partner that would not, like a weathercock, change one’s foreign policy priorities’. The country’s principled stance on the matters of regional integration allows it to demand tangible assurances that institution-building in the framework of the Eurasian Union would not be an example of Russia ‘shaping everything for itself’. As for the increasingly popular in the West ‘myth’ of neo-Soviet revival, the President of Kazakhstan has refuted it as groundless (Nazarbayev, 2014).

Misconceived interpretations of Russia’s regionalist agenda are typically informed by the old-fashioned geopolitical thinking with its propensity to see everything through the lens of a zero-sum game, where one side’s win must necessarily constitute everyone else’s loss. A strategically rationalist, interest-centred view that takes only power differentials into account may fail to produce an adequate explanation of Russia’s taking the lead in creating supranational institutions in Eurasia. According to such an account, in a post-hegemonic environment that the former Soviet space represents, Russia, as the strongest state, should be content to exploit numerous power asymmetries on the basis of bilateral agreements with its weaker neighbours. It may consent to multilateral arrangements where it has a de facto or de jure veto power. It may attempt an alliance-building exercise or launch a fully intergovernmental regional integration project to create a pocket market for its exporters or ensure cheap labour inflows. However, it is not expected to agree to the deepening of integration via the creation of commitment institutions or a supranational delegation of authority (Cooley & Spruyt, 2009).

The launch of the first supra-national executive institution of the Eurasian Union – the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) – apparently does not fit the scheme and falsifies these predictions. The EEC acts on the principle of consensus, which nullifies voting privileges that Russia could demand because of the size of its economy and the share of its contributions to the institution’s budget. At the same time, the commission may issue decisions mandatory for all of the parties. Why should Russia agree to voluntary restrictions on its sovereignty? Why should it face future prospects of being outvoted by its partners, even if now the key EEC decisions are consensus-based? Why should its national or regional authorities be obliged to honour the decisions of the Court of the Eurasian Economic Union?[[4]](#endnote-4)

Common social problems

A possible answer to this conundrum is that Russia’s policy toward the ‘near abroad’ may be animated by a genuine concern for its development. Not to be reduced to its geopolitical weight alone, Russia’s Eurasian neighbourhood is, potentially, a source of immense wealth. Moreover, a number of common interests unite Russia and the Central Asian states. These interests are not only economic, or political, but also social and cultural in nature. Among the plethora of common social problems, we should note certain disproportions in distribution of material and labour resources because of historical and cultural differences between the constituent parts of the former USSR.

Labour migration in the CIS area is estimated at 9–10 million people a year. The main donor countries are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. The total share of the migrant workers leaving their homeland for other countries varies from 20% of all adult citizens in Georgia and Azerbaijan to 30% in Kirgizia, Moldova and Tajikistan. Almost 70% of all migrant workers go to Russia. In 2014, migrant labour remittances sent from Russia to Uzbekistan accounted for 12% of Uzbekistan’s GDP. Labour migrant remittances make up close to half of GDP in Tajikistan and 31−32 % of GDP in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. These two countries are the most remittance-dependent in the world. Most labour migrants from Central Asia work in Russia. Yet another big recipient state is Kazakhstan. About 40% of all remittances to Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine come from Russia.

The sudden influx of migrants causes many problems, which were unknown in the past. Two that are key are discrimination and xenophobia, both manifesting in a lack of tolerance toward foreign workers. The lack of proper education and cultural sensitivity affects all parties to these conflicts – both the host country and various migrant communities, especially those that lack Russian language proficiency.

New states tend to create new histories, new myths and new heroes. Of course, those who become new heroes here or there are quite often looked down upon by other nations. One country’s hero may be perceived as a scoundrel or a murderer in another country. The growing cult of Amir Timur (now the Great Ruler, formerly the Great Conqueror) in Uzbekistan, just like the other ‘great’ khans in Central Asia, may be welcome by Central Asians, but perceived very differently by the Russians. Similarly, the ‘heroes’ of Ukraine’s nationalist resistance to the Soviet power are remembered mostly as Nazi collaborators and mass murderers in Russia and Belarus.

Strict censorship of Russia-made programmes and even the blockade of Russian radio and TV stations by some of the neighbouring states do not help. Such policies result in mutual cultural alienation, complicate social adaptation of labour migrants, and lead to profound culture shocks and conflicts on both mass and elite levels of society. The sooner the national governments of the migrants’ home countries review their attitude toward teaching the Russian language and spreading Russian culture at home, the better it will be for their citizens looking for temporary employment in the Russian Federation. Reciprocally, the more efforts are invested in cross-cultural education in Russia itself, the more a solid foundation will be built for interethnic tolerance and intercultural dialogue in the newly-globalized, multicultural societies of Eurasia.

Eurasian regionalism as an instrument of development and security

Russia’s regional integration policy clearly advances Russia’s national interests. However, it does not mean that other countries do not also benefit. For Central Asian states, regionalism opens a space to balance against potential great power hegemony and a platform to jumpstart development. The Central Asian governments are fully aware of tangible economic and political benefits that regionalization offers: expanded economic aid, improved security and enhanced international status. The presumed encroachments on their national sovereignty have so far failed to materialize, even when Russia’s intervention was required and requested, as in the case with Kyrgyzstan’s mob riots.

There is little wonder that every participant country pursues its national interests, as it should and would be expected to do. More important is the fact that, in many instances, national interests of one country coincide with the interests of its neighbours. Russia, China, and the Central Asian states have closely watched the Arab revolutions of 2011 and are mindful of these revolutions’ complex consequences. One of the lessons of the Arab Spring is that development and security go hand in hand. Hence, wide-reaching economic development and regional self-help are important not only for the general well-being of societies, but also for the regimes’ peaceful transitions to democracy.

Perhaps, this was on Putin’s mind when he offered US$15 billion and a 30% reduction on gas imports to the government of Viktor Yanukovych. Ukraine’s ‘Maidan’ revolution of February 2014, the fall of Yanukovych and the ensuing hostilities between Russia and Ukraine have caused much anxiety to politicians and state leaders across Central Asia and the Caucasus. Paradoxically, these events have also made them more inclined to cooperation with Russia. Such cooperation may slow down popular mobilizations against this or that authoritarian or otherwise underperforming regime. At the same time, the regime’s stability opens space for its gradual opening and peaceful, rather than revolutionary, transition to democracy. If the unfortunate aftermath of the Arab Spring may teach us anything, it is, perhaps, first and foremost the Hobbesian axiom that even less than perfect government is better than no government at all.

The Eurasian governments prefer regionalization from above and shy away from supranational institutions that may tangibly limit their sovereignty. While the European-style pooling of sovereignty will not be attempted any time soon, the ongoing trade and policy coordination and the creation of effectively functioning multilateral institutions characterize a generally successful regionalist project. The Eurasian Economic Union, if institutionalized properly, may actually materialize as an ‘effective link between Europe and the dynamic Asia–Pacific region’ (Putin, 2011). It will not necessarily repeat the EU or NAFTA experiences. New regionalism scholars maintain that regional integration processes world-wide need not proceed along the European blueprints of the late 20th century: they may have their own logic of development (Warleigh-Lack, Robinson & Rosamond, 2011). These processes in less-developed parts of the world attempt to shield the region from ruinous impacts of neo-liberal globalization (Väyrynen, 2003) and typically exhibit certain resistance to external influences (Beeson, 2003). In such a comparative perspective, Russia’s ambitions at regional leadership in the Eurasian Union should not be seen as somehow unique or unusual. They are not necessarily hostile to Western interests – or the interests of other Eurasian powers – India and China. However, the evolving situation in Ukraine impacts not only regional but also trans-regional and global security, and it is too soon to deliver a definitive verdict as to the future turn of events across the Eurasian landmass.

The fate of Eurasian regionalism depends on major actors’ ability to disentangle political economy from geopolitics. The whole project was originally devised as a developmental tool. It had acquired some features of alliance when the sieged fortress mentality took root in the Kremlin. Integration in the developing world has always been animated by the idea of using regionalist ties to adapt to the imperatives of globalization. Regionalism in Eurasia is called upon to provide a cushion against the potentially devastating effects of the current crisis of global capitalism. The main concern of the participating actors is the prevention of backsliding into the world’s periphery and maintaining political and economic independence, not to confront or provoke the West in any way.

Eurasian states are vulnerable economically. For many reasons they cannot risk the laissez-faire type of a plunge into the unchartered waters of global trade and finance. Some version of a developmental state and neo-protectionist policies of some type are called for to address systemic disadvantages that emerging economies carry vis-à-vis the mature capitalist economies of the West and fast-growing markets in East Asia.

Regional cooperation often enables privileged access to the credit, labour and trade markets of partner states, thus helping to resolve complex questions of economic development. Realization of major developmental and infrastructure projects, such as the Trans-Eurasian Development Belt idea proposed by Vladimir Yakunin or the Silk Road Economic Belt concept initiated by Xi Jinping, will bring further benefits to all participating states (Lenta.ru, 2014). Importantly, transcontinental projects of such magnitude can only be realized on the basis of broad international collaboration.

Eurasian regionalism has also become a factor in the provision of regional security. The CSTO and the SCO have been specifically devoted to this purpose. However, even the much criticized CIS has also been instrumental in performing a number of security functions: from preservation of essential economic ties and political coordination to providing for an organized division of assets, obligations and liabilities of the former Soviet states.

Regional cooperation in Eurasia creates an international environment conducive to the survival of vulnerable post-communist regimes, especially those directly challenged by the outside forces emanating from the unstable regional peripheries. The Taliban’s cross-border challenge to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan might have been hard to repel without some grounding of national efforts in broader multilateral and region-wide frameworks. The creation of the Eurasian Union will strengthen regional security and help withstand the threat of militant Islam.

Finally, regional integration establishes a symbolic community of belonging that bolsters legitimacy of the post-communist governments and validates them externally. In the current environment of Western politically motivated sanctions against Russia, the reconfiguration of the regional political and economic space is being pushed along the lines that do not lead to increased transregional cooperation: away from the liberal-democratic West and toward a more or less authoritarian, politically centralized and neo-protectionist East. This may still change, however, once the conflict in Ukraine has been resolved and the sanctions removed.

The Eurasian Economic Union reflects the participants’ common preference of the state-led, top-down variety of regionalization. It is projected to grow further on the basis of political initiatives and international agreements, rather than on the spillover effects of economic exchanges. It indicates the growing significance of Central Asia and the importance of the Asian vector for Russia’s foreign policy. It gives pride of place to the common interests of several countries resisting Western-style democratization for the sake of stability and growth promotion. Orientation on a developmental state of the ‘cohesive-capitalist’ type fits well with these nations’ tendencies ‘to equate rapid economic growth with national security’ (Kohli, 2004, p. 10). Eurasian regional integration takes its lead from the Chinese model of development and seeks to hedge against the risks of neo-liberal globalization. Whether or not it will become a success story will depend on the participants’ ability to develop the EAEU as they have pledged – ‘on the basis of mutual benefit, mutual respect and taking each other’s opinion into account’ (TASS, 2014).

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1. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, personal interviews, December 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. A senior official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine characterized it as a ‘geopolitical project’ serving Russia’s great-power ambitions. Personal interview, Kiev, 12 August 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In Hillary Clinton’s words, ‘It’s going to be called customs union, it will be called Eurasian Union and all of that. But let’s make no mistake about it. We know what the goal is and we are trying to figure out effective ways to slow down or prevent it’ (Klapper, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The Court of the Eurasian Economic Union takes over from the Court of the Eurasian Economic Community, which functioned from January 2012 to October 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)