

Article

Russian Power Politics and the Eurasian Economic Union: The Real and the Imagined

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Abstract

The paper investigates the discrepancy between the functioning of the Eurasian Economic Union and the perception of this organization in the Russian discourse. The study analyzes the official discourse on the EAEU in Russia produced by high-ranked Russian politicians, as well as the discourse on the EAEU in the Russian academic community. These discourses are chosen given their particular relevance for the Russian foreign policy decision-making. The paper shows that the perception of the EAEU by the Russian observers is strikingly different from the functioning of the organization. While the Russian discourse focuses on the ability of the EAEU to act as a power pole reshaping the global economy and to enhance Russian global influence, precisely in this respect the contribution of the EAEU is relatively limited; at the same time, real advantages of the EAEU are typically deemphasized by the Russian analysis.

Keywords

Eurasian Regionalism, Official Discourse, Expert Discourse, Perception Gap

Introduction

The establishment of the Customs Union (CU) of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan in 2010, which was transformed into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015 (and currently includes, in addition to three original members, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan), attracted substantial attention of both academic researchers and policy-makers (Libman and Vinokurov 2012; Dragneva and Wolczuk 2013; Vymyatina and Antonova 2014; Dutkiewicz and Sakwa 2015; Molchanov 2015; Lane and Samokhvalov 2015). While in the past regional organizations in the post-Soviet Eurasia remained mostly rhetorical entities, in the EAEU some progress towards functioning regional economic integration was achieved. In particular, it manifests itself in the existence of the common customs territory and the common customs tariff, as well as a common institution governing trade policy (the Eurasian Economic Commission, EAEC).

The debate on the EAEU in the literature typically perceives this organization through the logic of Russian power and control. The EAEU is seen as a tool of Russian foreign policy of establishing and safeguarding a specific zone of influence in the post-Soviet Eurasia (e.g., Balakishi 2016). From this point of view, the EAEU is interpreted as the Russian reaction on the development of the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership (Delcour and Kostanyan 2014). In her famous statement, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton explicitly interprets the EAEU as a reincarnation of the Soviet Union.¹ At the same time, this discussion rarely tries to understand the internal logic of functioning of the EAEU, its bodies and its institutions. This task is particularly challenging, because in Russia itself the discourse of the EAEU in politics and expert community and the actual practices of the EAEU are decoupled from each other. It is possible to argue that the epistemic communities of the post-Soviet countries construct their own image of the EAEU, which is only occasionally updated based on the actual experience of the organization.

A gap between the practices of an institution (in particular, a regional organization) and the perception of this institution is not rare. The bureaucratic reality of the EU is certainly different from both the optimism of the pan-European movement and the negative perception of Euroskepticism. However, in case of the EAEU, the gap seems to be particularly large and persistent. The goal of this paper is to critically examine the differences between the actual functioning of the EAEU and the interpretation of the EAEU in the Russian political and expert discourse. In what follows, I will refer to this image of the EAEU created by epistemic communities as an ‘imagined’ EAEU, to confront it with the ‘real’ EAEU.² The paper argues that while the perception of the EAEU in the political discourse in Russia is indeed highly inaccurate, the way how Russian political elites imagine the EAEU is actually one of the reasons why the ‘real’ EAEU functions in a certain way and remains different from the ‘imagined’ one.

Methodological Remarks

While studying the Russian perceptions of the EAEU, the paper borrows from the tradition of the critical discourse analysis (on discourse analysis see Fairclough 1995; Jorgensen and Philips 2002; Torfing 1999, 2005; Loizides 2015). In particular, it proceeds from the assumption that discourses play a crucial role in the construction of social practices and structures, but are at the same time themselves socially constructed. They play a crucial role in the creation and reproduction of

¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/a5b15b14-3fcf-11e2-9f71-00144eabdc0>, accessed 30 December 2016

² ‘Imagined’ here should under no conditions be interpreted as a value judgement to characterize particular discourse as ‘wrong’ or ‘misled’. Rather, it is chosen as a reference to the ‘imagined communities’ discussion in the literature on nation-building (Anderson 1991). As I will show, similarly to the ‘imagined’ national identities, ‘imagined’ EAEU does have substantial implications in the real world.

power structures. The choice of this theoretical perspective is driven by the willingness to explicitly distinguish between the discursive practices and the functioning of the EAEU – alternative approaches to discourse analysis viewing all social practices as essentially discursive ones and discourses only as constitutive (but not as constituted) would not make this distinction possible. Note, however, that the focus in the discourse analysis is typically on how discourses affect the interpretation of international events and are implemented in the foreign policies, as well as reproduce themselves (Milliken 1999). In this study, I deal with a case where policy practices are obviously decoupled from the discursive practices and no approximation of both (from either side) is visible, and try to explain the reasons for this outcome.

My focus is on two discourses on the EAEU existing in Russia. First, I look at the official discourse, i.e., discursive practices produced by high-ranked officials (especially the Russian president). This official discourse includes both official statements (or statements with similar status – e.g., newspaper articles explicitly designed to convey the official position before elections) and the statements made by politicians in non-official context (interviews, conferences etc.). Certainly, it would be incorrect to claim that all members of the Russian political class share the same discourse on the EAEU, but, given the authoritarian nature of the Russian state, the cohesion of the discourse is much higher than one frequently observes in other contexts. Second, I also look at the discourses produced by Russian epistemic communities: academic researchers and policy consultants.³ Again, I look at both statements made by researchers in scholarly publications (academic journals) and in publications directed to the broad public – this is because in Russia the boundary between those is often very vague and, in fact, large groups of Russian academic community view public statements as a more important than academic activity in the narrow sense (e.g., Sokolov 2013).

The focus at these two discourses is due to the following considerations. Official discourse is obviously most likely to affect the policy choices and be affected by them. Discourses of the epistemic communities are crucial in shaping the attitudes and the positions of politicians and bureaucrats: through the university education and (in Russia, to a lesser extent) policy advice academia affects how the politicians view the world. At the same time, the body of texts and statements produced by the epistemic communities is much broader than the (relatively scarce) statements of the officials and frequently offers a more elaborated

³ In Russia, the strict boundary between academic research and policy consulting typical for the EU or the US (Wallace 1996) is not upheld as rigorously: first, Russian researchers frequently see the development of normative implications and policy advice as their main task, and second, Russian IR emerged out of the tradition of the Soviet scholarship on world politics (*mezhdunarodniki*) with the main task of advising government on foreign policy matters (e.g., Avtonomov 2016). This is somewhat paradoxical, given how small the attention of the politicians to the policy advice actually is.

set of ideas on the EAEU. In the epistemic communities, unlike in the official discourse, one observes multiple discourses on the EAEU competing with each other. Hence, I attempted to extract texts from different discourses to find out the common concepts and ideas – and, as the next section shows, one can indeed identify them for Russia. The paper also looks only at academic discourse occurring in Russian-language publications: this is because publications in international journals are produced by a very small group of Russian academics decoupled from both politics and the majority of their Russian colleagues.

Looking at other discourses (e.g., generated by mass media, opposition, general public) is less attractive in the context of this study. First, the EAEU is a relatively narrow (and, to some extent, technical) topic, and the general public's attention to it is limited. Second, in an authoritarian state like Russia media, opposition and the general public have little influence on the political decision-making. Epistemic communities' impact, at the same time, is non-negligible, but it is present in subtle forms, e.g., through educating and training bureaucrats. Occasionally, epistemic communities also play the role of policy advisors, but in Russia the importance of scientific advice for policymaking is low – the task of advisors is rather to legitimize the already made decisions (Titaev and Sokolov 2013). Finally, discourses also define the set of actors “authorized to speak and to act” (Milliken 1999: 229) on a certain topic, and in Russia the discourse on the EAEU is structured in a way that it is restricted to public officials and epistemic communities. This is not to say that the general public is irrelevant for the evolution of the discourses: but it plays a role not by constructing discourses, but rather by serving as a (sometimes imagined) reference point, which discourses try to speak to (therefore, politicians and academics try to take what they believe to be public expectations into account). For example, authoritarian regimes have to care about their stability and hence think about possible public perception and interpretation of their actions (and try to shape it through propaganda).

EAEU in the Russian Political and Expert Discourse

Unlike the Western discourse on Eurasian regionalism, which only recently became prominent enough, the Russian discourse on the regional integration in the post-Soviet Eurasia has always been substantial. Both policy-makers and experts devoted a lot of attention to this topic. As a result, a certain way of perceiving the regional integration in Eurasia emerged. Libman (2012), in his survey of the scholarly literature, refers to a “standard post-Soviet integration paper”, typically based on four claims: that regional integration is inevitably beneficial for the countries of Eurasia; that the only way to integrate Eurasia is to emulate the EU; that the only factor precluding this emulation is the lack of political will of the leaders; and that the West is hostile towards any attempt of reintegrating Eurasia. The EAEU discourse similarly seems to follow a number of common

perceptions and ideas. In what follows, I first review the discussion of the EAEU in the epistemic community; then I proceed to how the EAEU is reflected in the public statements of politicians.

The perception of the EAEU by Russian experts appears to be based on three assumptions.

- First, regionalism is perceived not as a tool of *constraining the sovereignty* of individual countries (as it is done, e.g., in the EU studies or in many fields of comparative regionalism), but rather as a factor *empowering* some of them in the world politics. Regional organizations are seen as bargaining coalitions, where countries come together to collectively support their position against other ‘power poles’, or as tools of promoting economic competitiveness, which should again increase the countries power. Butorina (2005) offers a comprehensive picture of the world consisting of several competing and complementary regional projects aiming to influence the institutions and the structure of the global economy.
- Second, the main task of a country willing to promote its influence in the global economy and its vision of how it should develop, is to join such a regional coalition or to create one’s own coalition. Regional organizations (like the EU and NAFTA) and projects (like the Silk Road Economic Belt) are interpreted through this lense: “joining forces makes it easier to fight, to develop, to create a power center in the world of global contradictions and conflicts” (Leshukov 2016). Similarly, the EAEU should become a new power pole in the global world; post-Soviet integration allows its members to “maximize the benefits from globalization and to minimize its inevitable drawbacks” (Glinkina 2015: 12).
- From this follows the third assumption: by creating the EAEU, Russia is able to increase its influence in the global economy and more actively participate in its design. By joining a different coalition, Russia would be forced to accept this coalition’s vision of the global economy; within the EAEU, it can protect and develop the Russian position on this matter. Some even go as far as to claim that the EAEU is necessary for the survival of the Eurasian nations in the globalized world (Fonarev 2012).

The reasons for why Eurasian integration is indeed strengthening Russia as a geopolitical player are rarely discussed explicitly: the assumption seems to be that Eurasian regionalism provides Russia with greater resources through cooperation with the neighboring countries and that it safeguards Russian specific ‘Eurasian’ status, which is necessary to “ensure equal and mutually beneficial sovereign relations to the European Union and the US” (Titarenko 2014: 29). Eurasian inte-

gration is also seen as a way of refocusing the role of the region's economies in the global division of labor from resource export to technology (Lagutina 2015).

There are several specific varieties of this general framework. In particular, Russian observers differ in their perception of hostility of other projects and power poles towards the EAEU. For many of them, while some level of competition between projects is inevitable (because they represent different views on how the global economy should work), there is still substantial space for cooperation and interaction: in fact, precisely this interaction could constitute the main competitive advantage of the EAEU. Others see the dividing lines between the EAEU and other projects as deep and unresolvable: for instance, the EAEU's main goal should be to counter the Western influence in Eurasia. As a result, a continuum of different views on the EAEU emerges, with authors emphasizing the extent of its inherent competition against the West to different extent.

The following papers exemplify different stances of Russian scholars within this continuum. Butorina and Zakharov (2015: 53) represent a less confrontational view of the EAEU. While they clearly subscribe to all three assumptions presented above and argue that "an obvious, but officially not declared mission of the EAEU is to form a pole of geopolitical gravitation and a new center of power, alternative to the European and the American ones", they do not discuss the contradiction between the EAEU and the alternative regional organizations and rather highlight the internal preconditions for the EAEU to live up to its potential. Braterskiy (2015: 59), who again suggests that "the main goal of the Russian foreign policy is to create a regional economic community with substantial economic sovereignty and strong political influence, i.e., a new center of influence in the world economy", is more open in his statements about the possible tensions with the West: while the Russian policy is not seen as anti-American in its nature, it should inevitably lead to limiting the US influence in Eurasia. Vasilyeva (2015: 100) goes further in this direction. After echoing the discussed ideas by claiming that "the idea of Eurasian integration particularly fits the Russian geopolitical interests, as it creates real preconditions for Russia's positioning as a central country of Eurasia", she clearly suggests that the EAEU is designed to limit the fragmentation of the post-Soviet Eurasia in the interests of external actors (China, US and the EU). IERAS (2013: 52) claims that „the main problem in the practical implementation of the developed strategy of Eurasian regional integration is the competition of Russia for influence in the post-Soviet space against other large global players – USA, EU, China. They put substantial effort into implementing their own geopolitical and geoeconomic interests in the region, offering Russian neighbors such projects of international cooperation, which reduce their ... ties to Russia and tie them to other centers of power through economic and political means." Svetlichnyi (2012), finally, takes an extreme stance, suggesting that Eur-

asian regionalism is the main tool of preventing the US attempts to strip Russia of the status of great power and surround it by hostile nations. Krotov and Muntian (2015) provide a combination of two views (this approach is also echoed by many other observers, and, as it will be shown below, matters a lot in the political discourse): the EAEU is seen as potentially benefitting from cooperation with other regional organizations and willing to engage in it, but unable to do so because of the position of the Western powers (especially the US) and their rejection of the EAEU as a partner (this actually reflects the real skepticism many in the EU and the US express towards cooperating with the EU).

Interestingly, while highlighting the strengthening of the Russian bargaining power through the EAEU and explicitly acknowledging post-Soviet countries as a special “zone of influence” of Russia (Zhuravlev 2015), Russian discourse does not see it as a contradiction to the interests of other, smaller countries of Eurasia. The EAEU is seen as an association of equals (as opposed to the explicitly asymmetric structure of the European Neighborhood Policy, see Krotov and Muntian 2015) or as the only avenue of “independent development following one’s own agenda” for countries between competing power poles of China and the EU (Knyazev 2016: 154). While the association of countries with the EAEU is always voluntarily, the association with the EU is forced by external powers. Most likely, this view continues the already described tradition of the “standard post-Soviet integration paper” with its assumption of the beneficial nature of Eurasian integration for all participants; they, however, do not match the discourses developed in the EAEU countries themselves.

The official discourse on the Eurasian regionalism appears to fit that of the expert discourse, although it does not include extreme positions. In the famous article of Vladimir Putin published in *Izvestiya* in 2011 as part of the series of the programmatic texts before the onset of his third term and devoted to the EAEU, he explicitly suggested that the organization should become “a potent supranational community, able to act as one of the poles of the modern world”.⁴ At the same time, the article did not mention the aspect of geopolitical competition present in the expert discourse; instead, the *Izvestiya* article highlighted the compatibility of the EAEU and the European integration and the need to establish bridges to other regional organizations and structures,⁵ especially to the greater Europe, but also to East Asia. The then chairman of the State Duma Sergei Naryshkin in a public statement also suggested that in the period of “growing instability and zones of chaos getting closer to Russian borders” the EAEU should become a new “power center” and a “serious geopolitical player”.⁶ He also argued that he

⁴ *Izvestiya*, 4 October 2011.

⁵ The idea that the EAEU is fundamentally open to dialogue and cooperation with others was repeated by many high-ranked Russian officials before the Crimean crisis (see Klimov et al. 2012).

⁶ <http://eurasianclub.ru/11223-11/>, accessed 30 December 2016

would be surprised to see a positive reaction of the West on the emergence of such a strong competitor like the Eurasian Economic Union (State Duma 2014) and that some Western politicians explicitly tried to harm the development and the strengthening of the Eurasian integration, thus intervening in the affairs of sovereign nations.⁷ Putin, in his statement in December 2015, also argued that the West “did everything to prevent the creation of the common economic space between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus... Still does not want to talk with the Eurasian Economic Union as a full-scale participant of the international life”.⁸ Thus, the Russian leadership’s rhetoric sees the EAEU as an emerging power pole in the global economy, which the West tries to block and to prevent from developing, but which is – in its nature – not anti-Western.

The hopes for the Eurasian integration’s role as a factor strengthening Russian political influence in Eurasia (Savietz 2012) and even offering a Russia-led alternative on the global level (Johnson and Köstem 2016) seem to have increased following the growth of the Russian economy in the first decade of the 2000s. They can be discussed from different perspectives. It is certainly possible to question the fundamental validity of the assumptions underlying the perception of the ‘imagined EAEU’ by the Russian experts and politicians. Indeed, Russian EAEU discourse seems to be rather unusual if one compares it to the typical debates in the modern IR. The focus on power and competition seems to be closer to the perspective of the realism, which is generally rather skeptical regarding the viability of regional organizations; but a number of recent studies indeed highlight that geopolitics is frequently the driving force behind the establishment of regional economic organizations (e.g., Davis and Pratt 2016). From the point of this paper, however, I am more interested in a different question: whether the actually created CU and EAEU fit the picture of the approach stylized above (which Kheyfets (2015: 35) ironically refers to as “dreaming geopolitics”). This is what the next section will discuss.

EAEU as a Functioning Regional Organization

The picture of the EAEU as a new pole in the global structure of power, which is promoted by the Russian discourse, is strikingly different from the EAEU practice. There is a gap between discursive practices and their operationalization (Miliken 1999) into the policy practices – and, at the same time, lack of reflection of this gap in the discourse. To start with, it is not clear whether the EAEU can be treated as a source of power for Russia at all. The pooling of economic resources through the EAEU hardly improves the economic potential of the Russian economy: EAEU countries are either very small (Kyrgyzstan, Armenia) or crucially

⁷ <http://www.lragir.am/index/rus/0/politics/14090/31012>, accessed 30 December 2016

⁸ <http://ria.ru/economy/20151220/1345648082.html>, accessed 30 December 2016

dependent on Russian support themselves (Armenia, Belarus). Kazakhstan has a larger economy, which does not require any Russian support, but certainly not to the extent to drastically change Russian international economic power if joining a coalition with Russia. The ability of post-Soviet regionalism to encourage modernization and development of the countries and to free Russia from the dependence on resource exports is also debatable: while some believe that Eurasian regionalism could play a positive role in this respect (Hartwell 2016), others notice that it is unlikely to generate sufficient impetus for technological progress and could just conserve the old trade patterns and interdependencies (Michalopoulos and Tarr 1997). In any case, the EAEU in the current form does not contain any substantial industrial policy agenda, and is, as I will argue in what follows, unlikely to develop any in the future.

An even more important issue is that the internal structure of the EAEU is not designed to promote Russian influence. Generally speaking, there exists a design of regional organizations (which Hancock (2009) refers to as “plutocratic regionalism”), which is explicitly based on the delegation of authorities to the leading country rather than to smaller states: the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) was an example of this approach before the end of apartheid. The EAEU, however, does not follow this approach. Instead, it is structured as an apparent replica of the European Union, with the EAEC as a decision-making body claiming some supranational authorities. The Customs Union Commission (the first governing body of the EAEU) decision-making was based on weighted voting scheme, which provided more power to Russia than to other members. In the EAEC (and thus in the modern EAEU) this mechanism was abandoned in favor of the single majority voting rule (where Russian votes count just as much as votes of other members) or consensus decision-making. The EAEC Board (the main executive body of the EAEU) currently consists of 10 representatives, two from each country, each running one’s own agency. While they are able to make decisions through simple majority, de-facto decision-making is always consensus-based: in case of any disagreements, the EAEC bureaucrats seem to have a very strong preference to make no decision at all and instead to shift it to the political leadership – i.e., to the higher-level institutions (EAEC Council, consisting of the deputy prime ministers of the member countries, and the Supreme Eurasian Council, including presidents of the five states), which are intergovernmental in nature and make all decisions by consensus.

As a result, the EAEU clearly does not function as a conduit for implementation of Russian interests. On the contrary, the EAEC is frequently incapable of making any drastic decision in case of contradictions between members. In some cases documented in the literature (Libman and Vinokurov 2016), the EAEC made decisions not in favor of Russia, rather promoting the interests of the smaller

countries. At least in one case, the EAEU blocked a Russian initiative in a policy area, which the Russian leadership considered to be extremely important: in 2014, presidents of Belarus and Kazakhstan rejected the Russian proposal to exit the free trade agreement with Ukraine (which Russia envisioned as a possible reaction on Ukraine's joining the Association Agreement with the EU). Russia still cancelled the free trade regime in 2016, but did it unilaterally and had to introduce additional measures to prevent Ukrainian goods entering Russian market through Belarus. In this case, the existence of the EAEU did not help Russia in mobilizing other Eurasian countries in favor of its foreign policy and in fact rather made it more difficult for Russia to implement the decision it intended.

Here, it is important to notice that the Russian discourse on the EAEU is not identical to how the EAEU is interpreted and discussed by the epistemic communities and officials of other member countries. A detailed discussion of the Kazakhstani, Belarusian, Armenian and Kyrgyzstani discourse on the EAEU constitutes an interesting research question in itself, which would go beyond the framework of this paper (this topic is to some extent discussed in Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira 2016). The epistemic communities of these countries, which traditionally are closely linked to the Russian one (from the Soviet era, when the discourses produced in Moscow had to be reproduced elsewhere in the USSR), indeed replicate some elements of the Russian discourse. However, the focus on power accumulation as the main reason for the existence of the EAEU in the discourses of the smaller EAEU member states is much weaker than in Russia. Also the view of the inevitable competition between the EAEU and other regional organizations is less widespread in some countries of the EAEU (especially Kazakhstan) than in Russia. At the same time, the smaller EAEU members' discourses are much more sensitive to the issue of excessive dependence on Russia, which could emerge from the EAEU.

In Kazakhstan, for example, the EAEU discourse, produced by both president Nazarbayev, politicians and epistemic communities, explicitly highlights that the organization should remain a purely economic alliance not reducing the sovereignty of the country. While the media discourse on the EAEU is unambiguously positive, the epistemic communities appear to be more skeptical, although some of the expert discussions are not conveyed to the public (Schiek 2016). Kazakhstani discourse also highlights the need to develop ties between the EAEU and other regional projects in Eurasia (including the EU) to a much greater extent than the Russian one and deemphasizes the issue of competition between projects, which is sometimes critically seen by Russian observers.⁹ In Belarus, similarly, the key

⁹ http://www.ng.ru/cis/2016-06-23/3_kartblansh.html, accessed 5 February 2017; <http://www.kisi.kz/ru/categories/news/posts/eaes-i-evrosoyuz-budut-sotrudnichat---nazarbaev>, accessed 5 February 2017.

political discourse used by the Lukashenka regime, on the one hand, traditionally points out the importance of cooperation with Russia, but on the other hand, is very critical towards Russia itself as a realm of corruption and dominance of oligarchs, which also gives a natural argument in favor of protecting national sovereignty in the EAEU context. These discourses seem to clearly reflect themselves in the policy practices of the EAEU countries.

The EAEU is associated with an extensive redistribution mechanism in favor of smaller countries (Knobel 2015; Andronova 2016), e.g., through the reallocation of revenue from customs duties and pricing of energy – Belarus was particularly successful in receiving concessions from Russia in terms of export duties on raw oil supplied to Belarusian refineries. This redistribution mechanism is not unique for the EAEU – in many regional organizations with a strong asymmetry of power the leading state accepts the role of a regional paymaster (Mattli 1999). However, if the main goal of the regional organization is indeed defined as increasing global power and influence, it should go hand in hand with greater allegiance of the smaller countries towards foreign policy agenda of the leader, and in Eurasia it does not appear to be the case – in some sense, Russia pays either for benefits from the EAEU it does not value itself (on this topic see Libman et al. 2016) or for the ‘imagined’ EAEU.

Thus, in the current form, EAEU rather functions as an additional veto player making rapid changes in the economic policy more difficult than in case Russia were doing it alone (Libman and Ushkalova 2013). This situation is unlikely to change in the future. First, as mentioned, smaller states (especially Kazakhstan) clearly try to avoid excessive Russian influence through the EAEU – this factor, in fact, was crucial for the entire evolution of the post-Soviet regionalism (Hancock and Libman 2016). As a result, they are unlikely to agree to any decision-making mechanism or power delegation scheme, which will give too much influence to Russia. Russia, in turn, is constrained in its ability to pressure the smaller members. It is questionable whether it could coerce them through economic measures (again, Kazakhstan is the most prominent case, but even Belarus shows successful resistance to Russian coercion in multiple cases, see Libman 2015b); furthermore, an attempt to systematically exercise coercion against one member would be perceived by other countries as a threat and hence result in Russia losing international allies – which is an outcome Russia, especially after the Ukrainian crisis, hardly can afford. Second, a general feature of the EAEU countries bureaucracies, which they demonstrate at all levels, is the lack of initiative and attempt to avoid any independent decision-making in a somewhat debatable situation – both because of how bureaucrats are trained and how they are socialized. There is no reason to expect that Russian or Kazakhstani bureaucrats will start behaving in a different way if they are delegated to the EAEC.

In addition, while the Russian rhetoric frequently emphasizes a much broader ambition of the EAEU, the actual language of the EAEU documents and charters shows clear constraints on the scope and objective of the organization (i.e., official discourse of the EAEU itself and Russian discourse on the EAEU contradict each other). Although some studies attempt to link the EAEU to a particular ideology (especially the ‘Eurasianism’, which is in itself a very broad concept) (Pryce 2013; Lukin 2014), this is mostly done focusing on Russian rhetoric or on interpretation of Russian actions: the EAEU as such carefully avoids any ideological statements or commitments, even to the extent to which they were usual in the preceding organizations like the CIS (Obydenkova and Libman 2016).¹⁰ There is no political integration agenda in the EAEU, mostly because of clear resistance of Kazakhstan, insisting on the EAEU remaining a purely economic organization. Even symbolical political steps (like an EAEU interparliamentary assembly, which was welcomed by high-ranked Russian officials, see Klimov et al. 2012) was ultimately rejected by Kazakhstan. Similarly, differences between economic systems and economic policy objectives of the EAEU countries (the state-led Belarusian economy, the Russian economy with its growing inclination towards protectionism and Kazakhstan with a much more liberal approach) are so large that a common industrial policy is beyond the reach of the EAEU countries – the major progress of the EAEU was achieved in much more basic aspects of integration, like the free movement of people and capital, common customs tariff and abolition of internal customs borders.

This, of course, does not mean that the EAEU is unable to produce any significant benefits for the Russian power policy agenda. The EAEU can be seen as a commitment device, which precludes smaller states from signing association agreements with the EU: because the EAEU is a customs union, any authority to conduct negotiations on the trade regime (an obviously crucial part of the DCFTA’s established within the association agreements) is transferred to the EAEC. Russia perceives the signing of association agreements as a risk to its influence on the neighboring countries of Eurasia (whether this perception is true is, of course, a very debatable matter). This effect of the EAEU, however, is really important for merely one of the member countries – Armenia – for other countries association agreements with the EU are irrelevant either because of their geography (Central Asian states) or of their political regimes (Belarus).

Amazingly, from the point of view of the Russian discourse, the EAEU does not appear to be a successful regional organization – although, if one used a different yardstick (that more frequently applied in the comparative regionalism research),

¹⁰ On how problematic it is to try to fit the ‘real’ EAEU into the Eurasianist rhetoric see Laruell (2015); again, it is more likely that the EAEU is interpreted by some factions of the member states elites in line with (one of the varieties) of the Eurasianism (Mileski 2015). On the general link between Putin’s rhetoric and Eurasianism see e.g., Ersen 2004, Schmidt 2005.

the EAEU would look like a regional organization with much more promise. As mentioned, the EAEU, with a number of exceptions, is a functioning customs union – and the set of regional organizations, which managed to achieve this result, is very small. Even as of 2016 (after Kazakhstan unilaterally adjusted a portion of its customs duties after the country’s accession of WTO) about 60% of all tariffs in the EAEU remain harmonized (which makes the EAEU comparable to Mercosur); before 2016, more than 90% of the customs duties were harmonized. Within the EAEU, a regime for free movement of labor and capital is established. The EAEC continues developing a set of common industrial standards. While of course EAEU is not comparable to the EU in terms of the level of delegation of authority, it does produce substantial policy outcomes (Vinokurov 2016). However, most of these outcomes are in the area of purely economic interaction, and in many cases are associated with facilitating exchange between countries rather than strengthening their global power. In the Russian discourse, this is typically seen as insufficient.

Moreover, the fact that EAEU constrains Russian policy in economic matters can actually be seen as a benefit for Russia – it makes it possible to constrain the influence of Russian interest groups on decision-making, which are now forced to interact with the Eurasian bureaucracy and therefore should find it much more difficult to implement their objectives. In the case of the EU, regional integration through transferring sovereignty to the supranational level was in fact used to overcome the reform blockades at the national level (Schmidt 2004). The EAEU is clearly unable to go that far (especially because, as the experience of 2015–2016 shows, Russia can and will act on its own in case it cannot receive sufficient support of the EAEU partners), but even some level of constraining Russian bureaucracy could be beneficial in the long run for Russia itself (Furman and Libman 2015). This argument, of course, is entirely different from that suggested by the three assumptions underlying the ‘imagined’ EAEU. Although it is not fully absent from the Russian discourse,¹¹ it is much less important than the line of reasoning presented above.

Reasons for the Interpretation Gap

Why does the ‘imagined’ EAEU fit the ‘real’ EAEU so poorly? Critical discourse analysis offers an intuitive argument for it: discourses reproduce themselves and, more importantly, reproduce the power asymmetries. Stated otherwise, one has to look, for example, at the evolution of the Russian epistemic communities producing the EAEU discourse and their internal power structures, to understand the

¹¹ In the already cited *Izvestiya* article Putin refers to the “competition of jurisdictions”, i.e., competition of countries for mobile capital, as a benefit from the EAEU; the interjurisdictional competition is recognized in economics as one of the most important tools of constraining the predatory behavior of the government (Brennan and Buchanan 1980).

reasons for the discourse persistence. From the very beginning of the 1990s the discourse on the post-Soviet integration was monopolized by the adherents of the specific school of regional integration research, which emerged in the Soviet era and was based on a very particular view on this process (Shishkov 2006), as well as by former students of COMECON searching for new focus in the academic world after the disappearance of their object of investigation (Libman 2009).

In what follows, I provide three more specific arguments for the existence of the gap between discourse and operationalization. First, as mentioned, it can be a by-product of the particular view on regionalism of the Russian (and, generally, post-Soviet) epistemic communities, and specifically the fact that they consider the EU approach the only legitimate approach to regionalism. Here, discourses are constitutive for social action, but because they are internally contradictory (the power goals, on the one hand, and the legitimacy of the EU, on the other), the gap I study emerges. Second, the gap can be an outcome of the Russian domestic policy concerns. In this case, the main focus is at the official discourse, which tries to take the expectations of the general Russian public into account; but epistemic communities in Russia (for which non-academic audiences are very important) also have strong incentives to adjust to what they believe the general public would be interested in. Third, the gap may be an outcome of a complex trade-off between Russia's attempts to keep EAEU functioning (due to domestic reasons) and the interests of the smaller member countries.

First, the point of view that the design of regional organizations worldwide, regardless of their actual objectives and particular challenges, is strongly influenced by the 'global script' characterizing the EU as the only legitimate design of regional organizations, plays an important role in the comparative regionalism scholarship (Jupille et al. 2013; Börzel et al. 2013). For Russia and Eurasia, it is probably an even more powerful explanation than for some other parts of the world. While in Asia the 'ASEAN Way' and the open regionalism approaches at least attempt to suggest an alternative to the EU model, in the post-Soviet world the perception that the EU represents the only possible design of the successful regionalism is very widespread. Although the EU as such is subjected to a lot of criticism in the current Russian media and political discourse, there is no alternative model of regionalism offered or developed. As a result, as mentioned, the EAEU is also mimicking the EU to a large extent (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2015). It influences both the institutional structure and the focus on trade as the main objective of regionalism. But the EU model requires some level of delegation to a supranational decision-making body rather than to the leading country and the creation of the supranational bureaucracy. Hence, there is a contradiction between two elements of the Russian approach to regionalism – the emulation of the EU and the perception of regionalism as a tool of designing global economy – which

contributes to the EAEU poorly performing in both instances.

Second, the representation of the EAEU in the domestic political and expert discourse can be linked to the demands of the Russian domestic audiences. In Russia, the idea of post-Soviet integration enjoys strong popular support (EDB 2016), and Russians frequently identify their country as a 'Eurasian' one (Rose and Munro 2008). However, this positive assessment seems to be fueled by two different sources: first, the personal connections many Russians still have to other post-Soviet countries (e.g., friends and family networks, personal histories etc.), which make maintaining open borders and close ties to these countries important for them (Sterzhneva 1999), and second, the nostalgia of Russia's past Imperial greatness, which is perceived as linked to dominating post-Soviet Eurasia or, at least, preventing the expansion of the EU and NATO influence onto this territory. The reaction of the Russian society to conflicts against Ukraine and Georgia in 2014-15 and in 2008, which effectively disrupted the existing social ties, but could have been interpreted as Russia regaining its strength and resisting the Western influence in Eurasia, suggests that the second factor is more important for Russians than the first one. In fact, Russians seem to have a negative attitude regarding several aspects of regionalism (e.g., free mobility of labor clearly runs contrary to the Russian widespread xenophobic sentiments, see Schenk 2010; Obydenkova and Libman 2016).

Thus, most likely, the interpretation of the EAEU as a new power pole much better resonates with the preferences of the Russian public. If the goal is to use the development of the EAEU as a further argument in favor of the successes of the Putin regime, the emphasis should be made on its potential ability to reshape the global economy and thus contribute to the growing Russian influence rather than on the actual areas where cooperation is substantial. Here, the EAEU is again very different from the EU – the European population perceived the EU as a tool of constraining individual states and promoting cooperation rather than an instrument of global power and geopolitics from the very beginning.

Of course, the focus on public opinion can explain the development of the political discourse, but not the scientific and expert one, which is driven by its own logic. Here, again, the internal specifics of how the Russian academic community evolved and developed is the crucial factor explaining why a view on the EAEU based on a particular set of assumptions became dominant. Morozov (2009, 2011) shows that for the Russian IR the focus on identity became predominant, playing a larger role than debates on methodology and scientific rigor. Three assumptions on the study of regionalism presented above clearly fit this inherently normative approach. The confrontation between Russia and the EU and the US after the crisis in Crimea most likely reinforces these patterns of thinking among Russian academics: on the one hand, Ukrainian conflict is interpreted as a definitive proof

that competition for power is indeed the most important factor in the modern world politics, and on the other hand, non-academic factors (in particular, attempts to fit into the predominant political discourse, see Libman 2015c) seem to become increasingly important for Russian scholars.

Third, paradoxically, the gap between the ‘real’ and the ‘imagined’ EAEU almost inevitably results from the trade-off Russian foreign policy faces regarding this regional organization. On the one hand, the preservation of the EAEU is placed relatively high in the order of political priorities of the Russian leadership: because of the public approval of the post-Soviet regionalism, because of Putin’s explicit commitment to the EAEU (in the already cited *Izvestiya* article) and because the existence of one’s own regional integration project is perceived as a sign of great power. On the other hand, however, as mentioned, smaller countries of Eurasia are reluctant to join a regional organization, which only empowers Russia. As a result, to keep the EAEU functioning, Russian leadership has to make concessions to smaller states: limiting the political agenda of the EAEU to the absolute minimum (in line with the demands of Kazakhstan), move from a weighted voting scheme to de-facto consensus-based decision-making, or agree to other requirements of smaller states in areas perceived by the Russian leaders as non-strategic (i.e., not threatening the national security). Hence, Russia accepts the EAEU functioning as an organization constraining its foreign policy (of course, only in some areas, which are perceived as not crucially important) in order to protect the existence of the organization itself. Importantly, Russia embraces the EAEU based on how its leadership ‘imagines’ it, but in order to protect this ‘imagined’ EAEU the Russian leadership allows large deviations between it and the ‘real’ EAEU – hoping that in the future EAEU could become closer to the ‘imagined’ ideal.

Of course, this mechanism only functions if the EAEU is indeed seen as valuable for the Russian politics (i.e., how much value the Russian leaders assign to the ‘imagined’ EAEU) and if the concessions made to protect the EAEU are considered as not detrimental for the interests of the Russian leadership. In the early 2010s, both conditions were clearly valid. After the Ukrainian crisis, the situation could have changed. On the one hand, the interpretation of the global politics through the lense of competition of different power poles and geopolitics became more widespread, both because of the higher priority assigned to the factors of power and security and because of reshuffling of Russian leadership, where those more inclined to this type of logic seem to have gained the upper hand. Currently, the Russian leadership relies much more on the traditional hard power (e.g., military force) than on the economic factors and soft power potentially associated with the EAEU. While in 2010-2013 the recognition of the EAEU by the Western partners was perceived as an important sign of recognition of Russia’s

great power status, after 2014 the reaction of the EU or the US on the EAEU, given the overall hostility between Russia and the West, became less important in the eyes of the Russian leaders. On the other hand, after 2014, as mentioned, the set of possible allies of Russia became much smaller and hence they became more important, at least in terms of symbolic politics. However, at the same time securitization of the Russian economic policy discourse took place: Russian leadership is now more likely to perceive economic issues as relevant in terms of national security and thus unwilling to make concessions. The protectionist turn in the Russian economic policy (Connolly 2016) may be incompatible with the EAEU.

Conclusions

It remains to summarize the main arguments of this paper. The paper suggested that there exists a substantial gap between how the EAEU is interpreted by Russian experts and politicians and how it operates in reality. The ‘imagined EAEU’ is discussed primarily from the point of view of organization’s ability to empower Russia in global politics. The ‘real EAEU’, actually, seems to be a factor constraining Russian economic policy rather than serving as a tool for Russian power. The fact that Russian policy is constrained by the EAEU is not necessarily harmful – on the contrary, these constraints could improve the quality of economic policy, especially given that overall turn towards more ideological and isolationist economic policy in Russia. The reasons for the gap between the ‘real’ and the ‘imagined’ EAEU are, first, the preferences of the Russian domestic audiences (which see the ability of the EAEU to shape the global economy and politics as a much more important achievement than the specific effects of the EAEU on economic policy); second, the trade-off between the overall view on regionalism and the recognition of the EU as the only legitimate form of regionalism in the Russian epistemic communities; and third, the trade-off between the willingness of the Russian leadership to preserve the EAEU and the concerns of smaller states.

The observations made in this paper are important for both the scientific analysis and the policy-making. In terms of academic research, the study highlights the complexities associated with understanding and interpreting the functioning of regional organizations: the self-declared goals of the regional organizations and their public perception can be strikingly different from the actual outcomes (Vinokurov and Libman 2017). From the policy perspective, the gap between the ‘real’ and the ‘imagined’ EAEU is one of the most serious challenges for evaluating the possibilities and the forms of interaction between the EAEU and the EU – a topic, which received substantial attention since 2014 (Popescu 2014; Moshes 2014; Krastev and Leonard 2014; Vinokurov 2014; Dragneva and Wolczuk 2015). European and US epistemic communities in many cases replicate the ‘imagined’ EAEU in their work rather than attempt to find out how the ‘real’ one works; as a result, the fact that the EAEU actually serves as a tool binding and

constraining Russian policy is ignored – and it is an important argument in favor of more active engagement of the EU with the EAEU (see Libman 2015a). At the same time, any interaction between the EU and the EAEU will be reinterpreted by the Russian leadership in line with the ‘imagined’ EAEU (most likely, as a sign of recognition of Russia’s interests and status), and one has to account for consequences of this interpretation in terms of other aspects of Russian foreign policy (e.g., how assertive it will become) and the domestic legitimacy of Russian regime. As long as the dichotomy between the ‘real’ and the ‘imagined’ EAEU persists, finding out an optimal format for interacting with this regional organization will remain an extremely difficult task.

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Bio

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