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Eurasian Regionalism as an Identitary Enterprise: Representations of European Other in Russian Discourse on Eurasian Integration

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EURASIAN REGIONALISM AS AN IDENTITARY ENTERPRISE: REPRESENTATIONS OF EUROPEAN OTHER IN RUSSIAN DISCOURSE ON EURASIAN INTEGRATION

ABSTRACT

The article argues that the recent discourse of the Russian elite on building an “Eurasian Union” contains a series of new attempts of delineating Russian identity. The author relies on the concepts of *constitutive Other* and *othering* to argue that Russian understandings of themselves continue to hinge on how they interpret Europe. Representations of European integration that the Russian rulers articulate are used in order to construct images and ideas legitimizing and guiding the development of Eurasian regional integration. The author suggests that while the symbolic “Europe” or the “West” remains a constant point of reference, there are several ways in which it has been used by Russians, leading to emergence of varying *identitary patterns*. An analysis of discourse on Eurasian regional integration is undertaken in order to show which patterns of Russian identity this political project discursively reproduces and how they may interplay with the future of EU-Russia relations.

INTRODUCTION

The paper addresses the theme of Eurasian regional integration in Russian political discourse. It tries to analyze the identitary underpinning of statements that Russia’s key public officials make about Eurasian integration, Russia and Europe and shows how the discourse of Eurasian regionalism is embedded in the broader context of debates on Russian identity. The theme of Eurasian integration received a new boost in October 2011 when Vladimir Putin published his policy article in the *Izvestia* newspaper. The article promised a speeded up creation of a regional “Eurasian Union” fashioned in the style of European integration.

Although ideas of Eurasian regionalism had been around for a while in some form, 2010–2011 clearly saw a new momentum in post-Soviet integration. This upsurge should probably be explained by a number of factors. The newly created Customs Union was more consequential in institutional terms than the previous regional schemes. There was also more ambition and commitment on the part of the Russian elite and personally Vladimir Putin who has made the Eurasian project a pillar in his political career. Finally, growing European presence in the EU-Russia “shared neighborhood” created new grounds for geopolitical rivalry through competing regionalist schemes.

The Eurasian vision has clearly been influenced by the presence of the European Union. However, as most analysis suggests, the declared plans of repeating the European success in the post-Soviet area are not feasible. Concurring with that position, I nevertheless suggest that in comparison with previous post-Soviet regional schemes the emergent Eurasian scheme will in the coming years be more consequential in terms of domestic political agenda and international redistribution of power and resources. The ongoing tug-of-war over Ukraine that is a key stake in the EU-Russia regional rivalry leaves some room for alternative trajectories of Eurasian integration, which should for now be seen largely as a project. However, studying the presently available discourse on Eurasian integration can already be of some scientific value. As I try to demonstrate in this paper, studying the discourse of Eurasian regionalism can provide an interesting elaboration on the topic of Russian identity formation and how it continues to be shaped by the self-Other relationship with Europe. The necessity to define oneself vis-a-vis the West is part of a long-term trend, although these newly produced self-definitions are part of a new political project. I thus suggest that in order to be understood properly, the political project of the "Eurasian Union" needs to be placed in this broader context of a durable identitary relationship with Europe. Drawing on constructivist and poststructuralist insights into the nature of international politics I examine how this project is talked about and conceived of by the Russian political elite. For my analysis I take public statements between 2011 when the new agenda was set by Putin's article and the summer of 2013.

In my analysis I rely on elite discourse, articulations made by Russian officials and politicians as well as Russian civil servants working for the Eurasian Economic Commission. In this respect, the discourse reflects a certain hierarchy. The public statements I came across typically either echo or elaborate some of the language and ideas that Vladimir Putin's policy article contains. This is not too surprising bearing in mind that the nature of the "power vertical" as the current organizing principle of Russian political life normally leaves officials with less autonomy to express their views on key political issues. But at the same time it probably has to do with the actual gap between the Russian socioeconomic reality and European integration. This may make its concepts and problems an unusual business for some Russian civil servants and limit their statements largely to recombination.

My theoretical framework invokes a relational concept of identity. In order for a subject of international politics to be able to produce definitions of the self, it needs a constitutive Other. The Other is a symbolic figure against which the Self is differentiated and infused with certain characteristics. These characteristics of the Self may come as contrast or in degrees of similarity to the characteristics

ascribed to the Other. But definitions of the Self and definitions of the Other have to be produced in a nexus and are mutually sustaining. There is, thus, an identity dependence on the figure of the Other. This figure is not directly another subject of international politics, but an image of this subject that the Self creates emphasizing certain characteristics (“othering”). The Self can also come up with multiple otherings of the same Other as can be seen from the multiple interpretations that the figure of “Europe” received in the course of Russian history. Consequently, a multiplicity of otherings brings in a multiplicity of definitions of the Self.

Understanding the constitutive Other as a symbolic figure constructed by the Self suggests that the former is not free to choose how it is being Othered. However, the definition of self and other is not a pure monologue of the Self. Identity formation is influenced by the structure of interactions that the Self experiences. And in this structure the reaction of the Other to definitions put forth by the Self can play an important role. This is why as part of my conceptual basis I also invoke the theme of recognition as the Other’s acquiescence to self/other definitions. The granting of recognition is a factor that has a say in which identity patterns will be encouraged and stabilized or rejected and marginalized.

My argument with respect to the empirical case in question largely boils down to the following claim. Experimenting with some notions of regional integration may be a new thing in the discourse of Russian officials. But on the deeper structural level it reveals already known identity patterns and should therefore be considered an organic part of the broader Russian debate on Europe. The new language of regional integration is used to reposition the Russian self in ways that are highly reminiscent of previous self-definitions which have always somehow involved a symbolic reliance on the European Other.

In the article I try to give a taxonomy of the different Russian identity strategies, that is, of ways that the European Other has been relied on to produce definitions of the Self. I contend that these form a spectrum that opens possibilities for conflict and rivalry as well as learning and cooperation. I also argue that the number of identity patterns is practically limited, in other words, there is only so many stories that Russia can tell about its relationship with Europe and that the discourse of Eurasian regionalism – as a sum political visions and arguments about Eurasian integration put forth by the Russian elite – illustrates this fact. I finish by considering what the role of the European response to Russia’s project of Eurasian regionalism may be in the future shaping of this discourse and in stabilizing the discourse by narrowing it down to a specific pattern.

The study that I have done clearly has its limits. On the conceptual side, though I am rather certain that Eurasian regionalism has to be inscribed into the broader

context of Russia's identity "relationship" with Europe, I am not sure whether I have done the best possible job in analytically separating the individual identity patterns and perhaps a better taxonomy can be offered. On the methodological side, my overview is qualitative and interpretative and offers no quantitative analysis of discourse. In empirical terms, it has been selective and limited itself to statements of policy-makers and may therefore be missing the potentially broader scope of public discourse. I, nevertheless, consider it to be at least somewhat representative as the statements I included in my analysis belong to key policy-makers concerned with the issue.

"EURASIAN UNION": A NEW PROJECT AND A NEW DISCOURSE

When in 2011 Vladimir Putin announced his plans to create a "Eurasian Union" through his seminal policy article in "Izvestia", it aroused mocking skepticism. The larger-than-life project promised recreating the decades of experience in building the European Communities in the post-Soviet space within the scope of just a few years. It was not just the super-ambitious goals that raised eye-brows. By the beginning of the third post-Soviet decade "virtual regionalism"¹ had become a habit in the area. Long-term economic and political consequences of regional integration would typically come out as next-to-nothing. But top-level meetings accompanied by grand declarations ensured mutual recognition and boosted the leaders' domestic legitimacy. That was an important publicity substitute for those post-Soviet regimes that were considered untouchable in the West. As for Russia specifically, integration projects like the so-called "Union State of Russia and Belarus" were seen as ways of caressing the imperialist ego still strong with the Kremlin elites and parts of the broader Russian public.

Naturally, the declarations on the "Eurasian Union" were explained as a classical publicity move that Putin undertook as part of the strategy preparing his official return to Kremlin in 2012. What made the vision both more entertaining and at the same time, explicitly unrealistic, was the deliberate use of language of European integration to frame Eurasian integration and the use of the European Union as a symbolic reference point for goal-setting. This rhetorical strategy was introduced in Putin's "Izvestia" article and keynote figures of the Kremlin elite were apt in following their discursive trend-setter.

These rhetorical attempts at fusing the two integrations immediately provoked the stamp of a "pipe-dream". That is despite the fact that the creation of the Customs

1 Allison, R. (2008), 'Virtual Regionalism, Regional Structures And Regime Security In Central Asia', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp.185–202.

Union between Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, envisioned as the initial stepping stone towards a full-scale supranational political union, was, by some expert judgements, notably more consequential than all previous still-born initiatives and had potential to compete with the European Union in exporting regional governance (see Dragneva, Wolczuk, 2012).² Not surprisingly, the idea of creating supranational political institutions quickly met the reluctance of Russia's junior partners. Naturally fearful of a Kremlin hegemony, the regimes in both Kazakhstan and Belarus rushed to emphasize their preference for the economic component of Eurasian integration and reluctance to transfer political authority to the would-be "Eurasian Union".

The two years that elapsed since the publishing of Putin's seminal article saw a lot of stipulations on Eurasian integration becoming an alternative to the common European regionalist schemes in the "shared neighbourhood". The key questions have been, what chances the prospect of building an "Eurasian Union" had with those who had simultaneous offers from the EU, and what possibilities it bears for bringing Russia's traditional integration partners closer.

Following the 2013 events in Belarus and Ukraine it was not even clear at this point whether the next stage planned for Eurasian integration, the Eurasian *Economic Union* would meet its ambitious deadline of 2015. The conflict over joint potash exports that led to the arrest of a Russian senior executive in Minsk has once again exposed the precarious, non-transparent and highly conflictual nature of economic integration between the two countries. And the trade war that the Kremlin had to launch on Ukraine in a desperate attempt to bully its government away from signing an Association Agreement with the European Union casts doubt on how competitive could Russian-sponsored regionalism really be vis-a-vis the EU. If that situation signalled anything at all, it was definitely not the "growing attractiveness of the Eurasian Union project"³.

EURASIAN REGIONALISM: IDEOLOGICAL FREE-RIDING OR NEW WAYS OF OTHERING?

Regardless of how well Eurasian regionalism fares in rivalling European neighbourhood schemes in the coming years – and whether Vladimir Putin eventually gets his medal for chasing Ukraine straight into the arms of the EU, as

2 Dragneva R. and Wolczuk K. (2012), 'Russia, the Eurasian Customs Union and the EU: Cooperation, Stagnation or Rivalry?', *Chatham House briefing paper*, available from <http://goo.gl/OKMFhg>.

3 Putin as quoted in Fedortsev, V. (2013), 'The EU and the Eurasian Union: Partnership instead of competition?', in Meister, S. (ed.), *Economization versus Power Ambitions. Rethinking Russia's Policy towards Post-Soviet States*, DGAP-Schriften zur Internationalen Politik.

some suggested⁴, – I would argue that at this point there are several interesting insights that the existing articulations of the Eurasian regionalist project can give us. These insights pertain to Russia’s crafting of foreign policy and the identity patterns one can discern beneath it.

As any complex phenomenon of international politics Eurasian integration can provoke several theoretical accounts. There are arguments in favour of pursuing constructivist and identity-based stories over “rationalist” ones, although there is no way of entirely excluding the latter. Thus, it would be impossible to deny that the Eurasian project works to secure certain economic and political interests of selected establishment groups in Russia. From that point of view it is an extension of the current Russian state capture and the groups pursuing it can be seen as acting upon their own logic of consequence. But insofar as the level of a hypothetical “state interest” or “public interest” is concerned, there seem to be no place for a clear “rationalist” story that explains why Russia would need a “Eurasian Union” at the present moment. There is an apparent gap between capacities on the one hand and the costs and benefits on the other. Recreating the European integration experience in the post-Soviet area looks impossible for a number of structural reasons (see CEPS special report comparing initial integration conditions in the two areas⁵). Neither the economic nor the political or institutional contexts make the project look feasible. On Russia’s side comprehensive integration promises too many costs to bear, including, for instance welcoming the already unwelcome labour migrants and supporting uncompetitive “friendly” economies such as Belarus. So it is also hard to see the “Eurasian Union” as a utility maximization tool on this level of analysis. In short, even if the project accommodates particular rationally calculable interests, it would be difficult to supply a viable account that would exclude the identity dimension. On the other hand, assuming that the project resonates with a deep identity concern about the West helps put a lot of puzzle pieces in place.

If we hold on to this assumption, the discourse on Eurasian regional integration can hardly be interpreted outside the context of “competitive neighbourhood”.⁶ Few would probably doubt that the Kremlin’s activism in pulling together a “Eurasian Union” has been spurred by the EU initiatives unfolding in the wake

4 *EurActiv* (2013), ‘Putin ‘deserves medal’ for pushing Ukraine towards EU’, available from <http://goo.gl/Empj3y>.

5 Blockmans, S., Kostanyan, H. and Vorobiov, I. (2012), ‘Towards a Eurasian Economic Union: the challenge of integration and unity’, *CEPS Special Report*, no. 75., Center for European Policy Studies, available from <http://goo.gl/D9wf81>.

6 Kobzova, J., Popescu, N. and Wilson, A. (2011), ‘Russia and EU’s Competitive Neighborhood’, in Alexander, A. (ed.), *The Great Power (Mis)management*, Ashgate.

of Eastern enlargements. An interpretation that easily suggests itself is that the Eurasian project is a response to the 2008 launching of the Eastern Partnership. To a certain extent, one has to be careful with causality statements. As Shumylo-Tapiola promptly notes for instance, the Eurasian Customs Union is also instrumental in securing control over markets and access to resources in Russia's near-abroad. However, as she also remarks on a more constructivist note, the choice of a particular regionalist framework that is intended as counterpart to European integration demonstrates that Moscow seeks to be recognized by Europe, whom it "secretly admires", as an equal partner.⁷ The particular argument I lay out below is largely congruent with the latter line of thought. It seems, though, that pursuing rival accounts of Eurasian regionalism is a potentially fruitful exercise that may offer new theoretical insights into the interplay between identity, interest, and security in international politics. Furthermore, I would argue that, in this specific case, the readings must not be mutually exclusive. After all, even policies with a strong identitary underpinning must accommodate at least some rationally calculable interests. On the other hand, as the discursive framing of Eurasian integration demonstrates, the choice of particular institutional forms and vocabularies is hardly informed exclusively by interests.

Whatever the ultimate causality assumptions, recognizing the reactive nature of Moscow's Eurasian undertaking allows us to place it in a much broader historical context. Russia clearly has a lengthy habit of erecting parallel organizational structures that mirror the West in form, but usually not in substance. The Soviet Union's informal empire in Eastern Europe had an institutional façade of regional economic and security blocks (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and the Warsaw Pact respectively). This phenomenon of "reactive" or "countering institutionalization" could, in some sense, be said to encompass even the Soviet Union's domestic structure. The so-called "national republics", though lacking any real autonomy, clearly mimicked the organizational form of independent nation states. This applies especially to the Belarusian and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republics whose Potemkin sovereignty even had an international dimension in virtue of their being "founding members" of the United Nations and holding a seat on the General Assembly.⁸

In terms of more synchronic political analogies Moscow's attempts to plug itself into the discourse of European integration also has its clear parallels. It has been noted that throughout the past decade Russia has engaged in what could

7 Shumylo-Tapiola, O. (2012), 'The Eurasian Customs union: friend or foe of the EU?', *Carnegie Europe*, available from <http://goo.gl/U1kWML>.

8 Krasner, S. (1999), *Sovereignty: organized hypocrisy*, Princeton University Press.

be termed “ideological free-riding”. That is, instead of offering original normative content, it has been busy subverting and manipulating universal Western ideas and standards to legitimize its particular purpose. The doctrine of “sovereign democracy” has underpinned many justifications of domestic politics, while the 2008 conflict with Georgia has been framed in terms of humanitarian intervention. Other remarkable examples include strategic use of NGO-isomorphic structures, (both at home and abroad⁹) and the practice of exposing human rights abuses in the EU and the USA through special reports prepared by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁰

This striking lack of originality has received several readings. At a certain point Ivan Krastev taxonomized Putin’s regime as “postideological”.¹¹ Its ideologically indifferent and omnivorous nature allows it to switch at ease from articulating “sovereign democracy” to “modernization” as its forefront doctrine. The convenience of a “postmodern dictatorship”¹² lies in its ability to accommodate and co-opt various ideological constructs many of which would normally seem irreconcilable. Arguably, this boosts regime stability mid-term by lulling the public into an illusion of political choice. There is no reason then why this ideological supermarket should not include a local brand of European integration.

There is also a more dialogical reading of Moscow’s normative free-riding whereby foreign concepts are not fully implemented yet no genuine alternative is tabled. This reading explains it as a “decentering” strategy aimed towards the Western hegemonic discourse.¹³ The nature of hegemony is such that the dominated identify themselves, at least partially, with the core values of the dominant, and, thus have, to accept and reproduce their vocabularies. At the same time, they take advantage of these vocabularies to engage in indirect contestation and subversion of the hegemon’s dominant position. Their “relativist discourses”¹⁴ are meant to strip the hegemon of its monopoly in interpreting and applying the contested universal norms and categories. The Russian doctrine of “sovereign

9 See Estonian Internal Security Service (2013), ‘Annual Report 2012’, available from <http://goo.gl/7Hy6EU> for a fresh example of how the turf of civil society is used to anchor Russian influence in the Baltics.

10 See for example: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2011), ‘Report on the Situation with Human Rights in Certain Areas’, available from <http://goo.gl/4G2IC>.

11 Krastev, I. (2011), ‘Paradoxes of the New Authoritarianism’, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 5–16.

12 Pomerantsev, P. (2013), ‘Cracks in the Kremlin matrix’, *Eurozine*, available from <http://goo.gl/akjux8>.

13 Morozov, V. (2013), ‘Introduction: Locating international democracy’, in Morozov, V. (ed.), *Decentering the West: The Idea of Democracy and the Struggle for Hegemony*, Ashagate.

14 Ibid.

democracy” and the practice of exposing human rights abuses in the West is, thus, what was cleverly dubbed “arguing with the West in its own language”.¹⁵

The readings that I tried to spell out above are close kin to the interpretative framework that I am myself trying to use in order to shed some light on the discourses of Eurasian regionalism. My understanding rests on reflexive and dialectical notions of identity. It traces a deep identitary dependence that Russia has on the European Other and argues that the discursive constructs of “Eurasian union” are forming a new definition of the Russian self that will naturally hinge on a new “othering” of Europe. This definition is new insofar as it exploits the “trendy” Western vocabularies of regional integration. But from the point of view of deeper underlying structures of meaning it repeats well-known identitary patterns that can be easily discerned in previous Self/Other definitions.

RUSSIAN IDENTITY AND THE “OTHERING” OF EUROPE: A TAXONOMY OF IDENTITARY PATTERNS

One can hardly be any more elegant in expressing the constitutive role of the Western Other than Iver Neumann when he says that “Russian identity is actually caught up in the relationship with Europe”.¹⁶ The origins of this rather long-term relationship can be traced back to the adoption of the Byzantine edition of Christianity as opposed to Roman Catholicism. This was a historical choice which at the same time affiliated Russia to the Western world and set it up against it and resulted in what could be identified as the first Russian debates about Europe. Being thus divided by a common religion, Russia and Europe have grown into somewhat of a Siamese pair – at least, as seen from the Russian perspective. The perennial Russian debate about Europe demonstrates an inability of the Self to draw final and clear borders with its Other, which opens up the interpretative space for dialectical and post-structuralist readings of identity as being inherently processual and incapable of being stabilized as a fixed meaning.

Something that remains stable, though, is the “West” or “Europe” as the ultimate reference point for debates. Devoid of any fixed meaning, it is an empty signifier that leaves room for a whole spectrum of attitudes, allowing the Self to oscillate between full identification with its Other and utter rejection and confrontation

15 Makarenko, B. (2006), ‘Predposlednee Poslanie: Staryi Zhanr, Novyi Diskurs’ [The Penultimate Speech: Old Genre, New Discourse], *Politicheskii Zhurnal*, no. 17 (112), quoted in Ortmann, S. (2011), ‘The Russian Network State as a Great Power’, in Kononenko V., Moshes A. (eds.), *Russia as a Network State. What Works in Russia when State Institutions Do Not?*, Palgrave Macmillan.

16 Neumann, I. B. (1996), *Russia and the idea of Europe. A study in identity and international relations*, Routledge.

as the other extreme. The unstable love-hate “relationship”, thus, displays several recognizable patterns in which Russia defines itself vis-a-vis the West.

One pattern that is historically well-known is the negative self-definition performed *via* rejecting the symbolic West. This is an identity strategy undertaken by the 19th century Slavophiles as an early exemplar of the so-called “civilizational” trend in Russian political thought. This trend was later picked up by philosophers of the original “Eurasianism”, though the means of divorcing the West were more geopolitical than ethnocultural and confessional. The quintessence of this identity strategy was in postulating a “uniqueness” of Russia that left it on the other side of an unbreachable gap with the West. This gap implied impossibility of learning and, potentially, also conflict. The major irony of these self-definitions is that, structurally speaking, they hinge on “othering” the West and, therefore, reveal a strong identity dependence on it, albeit in a negative way. But, even from the substantial point of view, these strategies typically betray heavy intellectual dependence on Western-originating ideas. If the Slavophiles sang in tune with the 19th century European Romanticism, Eurasianism as a geopolitical vision was, in the words of Charles Clover, “cribbed from Mackinder” (Clover, 1999).¹⁷

Another generally familiar pattern is that of a “learning” or “looking up to” relationship. Russia is placed firmly inside the West but is seen as having fallen behind on the general European timeline. It is the pivotal idea of “Westernizers” of all times. The difference between Russia and Europe is seen as largely quantitative and not qualitative and, thus, essentially surmountable. European experience is viewed as highly relevant for Russia and recreating it on Russian soil becomes a central political task.

A third recurrent pattern of self-definitions involves both identifying and distancing from the European Other. Its underlying notion is that Russia *is* Europe but in a more metaphysical sense, so to speak. It is not identical to the current Europe that is seen as “false” or degenerate, having lost its original path, but represents the “truer” or “better” Europe buried beneath.

Finally, one can identify a fourth pattern that can be termed “equal dignity” or “equal worth”. It postulates ontological parity of Russia and the West as two global pillars of the world order. The sense of being dual and equal to the West can probably be traced down to the pride taken in being the Third Rome. But a much more obvious historical embodiment of this identity pattern is the Cold War bipolarity and the international institutionalization of its twin superpowers. As a cognitive legacy of the Cold War bipolarity still has a say in how Russia views itself

17 Clover, C. (1999), ‘Dreams of the Eurasian Heartland: the Reemergence of Geopolitics’, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 78, no. 2, pp. 9–13.

vis-a-vis the West. But the logic of power poles may not be its only guise. Being one of the two pillars may also imply a claim to an equal stake in jointly determining the universal rules.

The proposed taxonomy of identity patterns is partially congruent with the one that Ted Hopf offers to classify Russian discourses on identity in the 1990s.¹⁸ His framework of analysis includes four “discursive formations” that connect domestically articulated self-understandings with corresponding foreign policy orientations. He claims these competing identities to be those of New Western Russian, New Soviet Russian, Liberal relativist and Liberal essentialist. Although this framework is more context-specific, it rests on a similar juxtaposition of ideas about Russia and its Other. The liberal essentialist assumes irreducible uniqueness, New Western Russian advocates ontological identity and a catch-up logic and the New Soviet Russian is largely thinking in terms of binarized confrontation.

The approach elaborated here is similar to Hopf’s also in the sense of acknowledging co-habitation of different identity patterns that can compete or become intertwined within complex ideological constructs. For instance, uniqueness can be married to messianism as in the philosophy of religious Slavophilism. As Neumann writes, “this nexus between Russian Messianism and Romantic nationalism would prove to be a lasting and crucial one”¹⁹. Going even further, one could say that combining the doctrine of Russian uniqueness and universalism historically comes in more than one guise. As Russia’s universalism is predicated on a notion of a deeper identity with the West, it introduces the option of challenging the West’s own normative authenticity and supplanting or “amending” the degenerate Western universality with the “true” Russian one. Such challenge may come in the form of various forms of Messianism. The Slavophile intellectuals with their international agenda of spirituality promotion are one example, but the Soviet Marxist “messianism” follows essentially the same pattern. It promises the “bourgeois” West to deliver globally a Communist society which – according to the Marxist logic – is the natural historical successor of the degenerating “rotten” capitalism. Postulating Soviet socialism as the birth throes of the new society endows Russia with the moral superiority of a forerunner in the universal project. And, as Hopf argues, it allows to establish a global hierarchy with Russia (or the USSR) on top as a “vanguard” of modernity and a universal template for capitalist and developing countries.²⁰

18 See Hopf, T. (2002), *Social construction of international politics: identities & foreign policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

19 Neumann, I. B. (1996), op. cit.

20 Ibid.

What is characteristic, though, is that both Christianity and Marxism are initially Western-based ideological enterprises that have been, at a certain point, imported into Russia and – from the specifically Russian point of view – have been mastered to the extent that they can now be “re-exported” back. The assumption of deeper identity with the West thus presumes that both Russia and Western Europe are part of the same broader normative project. But it also tacitly implies that Russia has been more successful in carrying it out. This gives it moral grounds to challenge the West on their common normative turf *via* a competing articulation of universality. It is only of secondary importance, whether this challenge comes in the historically specific ideological guise of religious spirituality, a Marxist vision of a more just social order or better more efficient schemes of regional integration. From a formal structuralist point of view, the relation between the Russian Self and the European Other seems to be organized in a similar way, suggesting a limited number of recurrent identity patterns and, thus, a finite number of narrative structures that can represent this relation. Which does not prevent the emergence of seemingly new ideological self-descriptions such as Eurasian regionalism.

It is tempting to conflate these identity patterns (“looking up to Europe, unique non-Europe, authentic or alternative Europe, of equal dignity with Europe”) wholesale either with specific periods in Russian history, or with particular ideologies based on their being either more Western-leaning or isolationist and confrontational. But both would be an oversimplification that ignores the complex and heterogeneous nature of any ideological discourse. As seen from the example of Slavophilism, it can harbour the motifs of both isolating distinctness and universality. And an initially Westernizing discourse of “catching up” has the potential of evolving into confrontational attitudes, should the pupil want to “best” the teacher in order to challenge him.

It would be more reasonable to see each specific ideological discourse as being “populated” by co-existing identity patterns and motifs. There can be contradictions. Erik Ringmar provides an example of the “two-track” foreign policy of the early Soviet period.²¹ One was aimed supplanting the Western world order of “capitalist” nation-states by igniting a global proletarian revolution through a network of foreign anti-government revolutionary movements. The other tried to secure recognition of the USSR as a legitimate member of this very order by seeking friendly terms with certain “capitalist” governments and participating in interwar European collective security arrangements. The Stalinist USSR eventually opted for the second strategy. Arguably, as a result of both the pressure from the

21 Ringmar, E. (2002), ‘The Recognition Game Soviet Russia Against the West’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 37, no. 2 pp. 115–136.

international environment and domestic regime mutations. It could not trash its universalist messianic ideology that underpinned domestic regime stability, but had to find an ideological compromise in concepts such as the building of a “socialism in one country”.

Ideological discourses, thus, tend to become somewhat more coherent and stabilized as choices are made about the policy alternatives that they frame. Though not irreversible, this dynamic brings to the forefront some dominant ideological interpretations, while others have to take a back seat and are kept marginal. In this respect the discourse of Eurasian regional integration is highly interesting precisely in virtue of being rather fresh and, thus, unstable. As it looks now, it is an eclectic combination of elements belonging to other discourses (e.g. regional economic integration, classical geopolitical Eurasianism). The elements are pinned together by a central idea of an “Eurasian Union”. The transitive nature of the discourse on Eurasian regional integration has allowed for an interplay of a variety of recognizable identity patterns. Should the “Eurasian Union” project evolve into something more consistent and substantive, some of them are probably bound to be marginalized.

EUROPEAN OTHER AND RUSSIAN SELF IN THE DISCOURSE ON EURASIAN INTEGRATION

Andrew Hurrell observes that the “public face” of regionalism is often “purely economic”, but it hides a more complex dynamic of interests and logics.²²

On the part of the Russian elite there is a frequent tendency to cast their undertaking in the language of economic integration and to persuade the public that the project is primarily about maximizing utility. Their discursive strategy is aimed at depoliticizing the issue, while criticizing the West for inappropriately politicizing it. Thus, even the prohibitive trade measures applied to Ukraine in the summer of 2013 in order to bully its elites away from the EU have been dressed up in economic and technocratic language.

However, these attempts begin to look increasingly self-contradictory next to other strands of discourse that openly admit that the “Eurasian Union” is not a utility maximization tool, but a cornerstone identity undertaking. Tatyana Valovaya, Minister of the Eurasian Economic Commission, points out that Eurasian integration bears the potential of contributing to the formation of the “Russian

22 Hurrell, A. (2005), ‘The Regional Dimension in International Relations Theory’, in Farrell, M., Hettne, B., Van Langenhove, L. (eds.), *Global Politics of Regionalism. Theory and Practice*, Pluto Press.

national idea” as the unifying agenda that reconciles everyone across the political spectrum.²³

The language of economic integration is also made use of in order to define the possible patterns of relationship with Europe. The idea of Eurasian integration as a stepping stone to a “Greater Europe” is introduced by Vladimir Putin in his 2011 seminal article and is subsequently echoed by other members of the political elite. According to Putin, “the Eurasian Union will be based on universal principles of integration and as a integral part of the Greater Europe, united by the shared values of freedom, democracy and the laws of the market” (Putin; Izvestia; October 3, 2011).²⁴

The lip service that Putin pays, *volens nolens*, to freedom and democracy makes this particular statement even somewhat marginal. On most occasions, elite discourse produced on Eurasian integration shuns any reference to the democratic context of regionalism. But the idea of a “common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok”²⁵ is certainly pivotal, insofar as it tries to define Russia and the European Union as part of a common normative project (the so-called “Greater Europe”). Curiously, Putin even suggests that Eurasian integration will not only bring its participants immediate economic benefits, but will also help them towards a quicker integration into Europe (*ibid.*).²⁶ This stands next to admitting that European integration is the ultimate goal for “Eurasian” countries, even if a very distant and abstract one.

The abstract nature of the “Greater Europe” certainly leaves a lot of room for subversive interpretation of this notion and for strategic use of its symbolism. One could argue that “Eurasian integration” is roughly as much about integration as “sovereign democracy” is about democracy. In terms of underlying identity patterns, however, the important symptom is the apparent desire to sign on to the script of “Europeanness”, even if in conveniently vague terms. There, thus, remains the need to start out by using the European other, or, in this case, the image of European integration as a specific form of othering Europe.

23 *Izvestia* (2012), ‘Интеграция объединяет всех — от коммунистов до «Единой России» и правых’, 9 July 2012, available from <http://goo.gl/zKt4Kl>.

24 Putin, V. (2013), ‘Пресс-конференция по итогам встречи на высшем уровне Россия – Европейский союз’, 4 June 2013, available from <http://goo.gl/xHJjoq>.

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*; Similar claims are made by Tatyana Valovaya who argues that there is “nothing anti-European” in the Eurasian Customs Union and that they do not intend to build any walls, quite on the contrary, to approximate their standards with the European Union (*Izvestia* (2012), *op. cit.*).

Claiming that European and “Eurasian” unions are walking down one and the same high road of regionalism²⁷ logically suggests at least two things. First, that there is room for comparison and benchmarking. Second, that there is relevant experience that can be transferred and that at least a certain degree of inter-regional learning is feasible.

All three themes: comparison, benchmarking and learning are, to some extent, present in the discourse on Eurasian integration. An example of benchmarking can be found in statements that the Eurasian integration has reached a stage comparable to that of the EU in 1993.²⁸

Learning is a particularly interesting theme as claims to learn are a good rhetorical tool of creating the appearance of goodwill and rationality. Promises to draw on past experiences can help add an air of legitimacy to your enterprise. The role of Russia as learner or “pupil” of the West²⁹ is most naturally associated with a Westernizing interpretation of the Russian self. But the devil is in the details, as usual. “Learning” may mean a variety of things. An overview of the elite discourse on Eurasian integration suggests that it prefers to talk of negative rather than positive learning. As I discuss in some more detail below, the dominant theme is that Eurasian integration should learn from the “mistakes” of European integration. Therefore, it admits serious defects in the European model, which is a presumption that is hardly reconcilable with the classical Westernizing posture.

The notion of embracing the West wholesale as an ideal model, characteristic for the time of reforms in the early 90s, has been marginalized and made unpopular under Putin, partly as a natural outcome of the high social costs of the reforms and partly as a result of skilfully manufacturing public opinion. Learning from the West can come at best by ways of “partial adaptation”.³⁰ There are, thus, apparent limits even at the discursive level, as to how much the theme of learning from the EU can be exploited without crossing the invisible line. “Learning”, in principle, is good. But too much learning would mean a “submissive” Westernizing posture that conflicts with the dominant interpretations of the Russian self.

27 For an example of this reasoning see Tatyana Valovaya’s remark: “The history of Eurasian integration is actually an attempt to build something similar to the EU.” Valovaya, T. (2012), ‘Eurasian Economic Integration: Origins Patterns and Outlooks’ Eurasian Development Bank, *Eurasian Integration Yearbook 2012. Annual Publication of the Eurasian Development Bank*, available from <http://goo.gl/0WILWa>.

28 Tatyana Valovaya as quoted in Blockmans, S., Kostanyan, H. and Vorobiov, I. (2012), op. cit.

29 Neumann, I (1999), *Uses of the Other. The East in European Identity Formation*. University of Minnesota Press.

30 Sakwa, R. (2010), ‘Political leadership’ in Wegren, S. K. and Herspring, D. R. (eds.), *After Putin’s Russia. Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain (4th ed.)*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Should the identitary pattern of looking up to Europe then be completely ruled out from interpretations of the discourse on Eurasian regionalism? Perhaps not entirely. *Per se* Eurasian regionalism is not a Westernizing enterprise, and policy analysts should not be tricked into thinking so. But its early articulations do reveal the recurrent Russian notions of Europe as a coveted role model. The “secret admiration” slips through occasionally.

Consider for example the statement by Viktor Khristenko, Chairman of the Board of the Eurasian Economic Commission. “Regional processes of unification and integration of societies are on the rise today. And the most advanced form of integration is the European Union, which is also in a serious crisis. ... And the next one, if we speak from the point of view of quality, that has been able to go on to the supranational level after the European Union is the Eurasian community”.³¹

This exercise in comparative regionalism certainly begs for a clarification of what exactly “quality” means in assessing regional integration – and whether indeed supranational institutionalization should necessarily be part of the criteria.

Inside the discipline of comparative regionalism there is a debate whether the European Union with its thickly institutionalized or “intrusive”³² integration is capable of becoming a universal model for regionalisms across the globe. While few would question the success of the EU, it is often argued that its experience has very limited relevance for other regions due to deep contextual differences³³. “Thin regionalisms” with a low institutional density are seen as a more viable alternative elsewhere (as seen from the history of ASEAN).

That regions are, in fact, very different and that the local background largely determines the trajectory of each regionalism is, thus, a rather commonplace observation and it sets a natural limit to comparing regional integrations. But as regards analogies, the specific context of state formation as well as domestic political regime dynamics may, in fact, make the post-Soviet area more comparable to Africa than to the original European Communities in Western Europe. With respect to the outcomes of integration proliferation there are indeed similarities to be found. In short, proliferation of formalized, but weak regional institutions is accompanied by ceremonial “summitry regionalism”, featuring a top-down elitist approach that secures domestic regime consolidation, but does not lead to an

31 *Голос России* (2012a), ‘ЕЭП – это четыре степени свободы для граждан’, 18 December 2012, available from <http://goo.gl/xvNSjS>.

32 Duina, F. (2006), *The social construction of free trade*, Princeton University Press.

33 See for example: Acharya, A. and Johnston, A.I. (eds.) (2007), *Crafting Cooperation: Regional International Institutions in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press; alternatively, see: Börzel, T. and Risse, T. (2009), ‘Diffusing (Inter-) Regionalism: The EU as a Model of Regional Integration’, *KFG Working Paper Series*, no. 7 for an example of a somewhat more “Eurocentric” approach.

increase in public welfare through regional integration.³⁴ This is a description of African regionalism that, to my mind, also fits rather well with the post-Soviet context. So perhaps for architects of Eurasian regionalism there is some room for substantive learning from the Africans – especially since chronologically the African Union is an earlier aspiration to emulate European integration.

In any case, there is probably not much rationality in selecting the point of reference. There are good reasons to think that the Russian policy-makers who produce the discourse on Eurasian integration are not too aware of the complexities that surround the dilemmas of choice between various regional integration models – even though Putin claims that Eurasian integration would bear in mind the experience of “other regional groupings” as well as the EU³⁵ (Putin; *Izvestia*; October 3, 2011). It seems instead that Khristenko’s representation of Eurasianism as next-best-to-the-West is not a rational and informed judgment, but, above all, an identitarily underpinned one. The choice of the benchmark is somewhat arbitrary and reveals a subconscious Eurocentrism of the Russian elite that they themselves would be loath to admit.

The posture of a “sovereign democracy” does not allow the Russian elite to think in terms of *consistently* learning from the European experience. But on the discursive level one can still see an automatic presumption that this experience is universally applicable and can be somehow “repeated” in Russia. This is evident in promises to steer Eurasian regional integration from economics to politics in the European fashion with little attention to possible alternative models. Consider the following statement by deputy prime minister Igor Shuvalov:

“We have come to the next stage of integration, forming the Eurasian Economic Union. In essence, we are repeating the experience of the European Union, we are building the same economic union, leaving the political union aside. This is a distant agenda, if there is one ever. But from the point of view of the economic union we are following the path that the EU has taken”.³⁶

The inherent Eurocentrism produces simplistic interpretations of European economic (not to speak of political) integration, suggesting a rather superficial knowledge of its complex dynamics. The rhetoric is also sometimes underpinned by a “teleological” notion that pulling together the economies should somehow

34 Hastrup, T. (2013), ‘EU as Mentor? Promoting Regionalism as External Relations Practice in EU–Africa Relations’, *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 35, no. 7.

35 *Izvestia* (2011), ‘Новый интеграционный проект для Евразии — будущее, которое рождается сегодня’, 3 October 2011, available from <http://goo.gl/NV7LN>.

36 *Голос России* (2012b), ‘Шувалов: “Евразийский союз повторяет опыт ЕС”’, 7 September 2012, available from <http://goo.gl/SiAQdU>.

inevitably bring about political unification. At the same time, it prefers not to address the specific historical and political post-World War II context of the original Communities.

The linear and deterministic understanding of integration inspires benchmarking and deadline-setting, the closest deadline being 2015 when the Eurasian Economic Union is supposed to be launched. Overall, this probably illustrates a rather characteristic Russian belief that complex political and economic processes can be orchestrated from the top. "Eurocentric" comparisons of Eurasian integration to the EU also suggest a "catch up" logic, although, in the absence of a "pupil" posture, this form of othering Europe is much more reminiscent of the Soviet period with its slogan of "catching up and surpassing" ("догнать и перегнать") the West.

No similarity with the Soviet period should be too surprising, bearing in mind the increasingly confrontational attitude of Putin's regime and the degree to which the Cold War lenses have shaped the thinking of the current Russian political elite. The interrelated themes of parity and polarity reveal this. Thus, Vladimir Putin's seminal article speaks of the "two largest groupings of our continent – the European Union and the Eurasian Union"³⁷. The idea that the future "Eurasian Union" should be recognized as some sort of a peer by the European Union in order for co-operation and co-existence to take place is also advocated by Tatyana Valovaya. While saying that she does not see anything anti-European in the Eurasian Customs Union (as quoted above), she also declares that "the Europeans should recognize us as geopolitical reality"³⁸.

The idea of parity and equal terms is pivotal for Russia's doctrine of relations with the EU and the convenience of a "Eurasian Union" as a discursive construct is that it now allows to give it a more legitimate "interregionalist" framing. As Vasily Fedortsev contends, "equality remains one of the most important principles of Russian policy in negotiations with the EU, and Moscow does not want to unconditionally obey EU rules within the framework of partnership, particularly in the political sphere"³⁹. While this may be true as a statement of fact, it is not clear how this approach could be justified in terms of actual capabilities. The only type of parity that Russia could boast of having with the West would be in terms of strategic arms. Thus, wearing the Cold War cap one could indeed speak of a parity. But if we presume that the rules of the game have changed, then Russia's aspirations to equality with the EU are, in reality, not backed by either institutional capacity, attractive political or economic model or comparable living standards.

37 *Известия* (2011), op. cit.

38 *Известия* (2012), op. cit.

39 Fedortsev, V. (2013), op. cit.

Rather, it seems, it is a residual predisposition of the elites that they maintain for purely identitary reasons. The neorealist presumption of rationality seems to be more of a wishful thinking in this case. Contrary to it, the states' ambitions do not always match their capabilities. As Dmitry Trenin has pointed out, Russia today remains the only country *psychologically* ready to challenge the United States – unlike China for example, though the latter may have more economic clout.⁴⁰

What is likely to contribute to sustaining this predisposition, is the difference in the meanings attached to power and greatness and the relative symbolic importance for Russia's self-perception of the more traditional notions of power versus "normative" or "soft" power. Consider, for example, that both the Russian political elite and the broader public may sometimes find that the sheer territorial size of their country is a due object of veneration.

It is not surprising then that regional integration is also often conceived of in political realist terms and contains the language of "polarity". The doctrine of *multipolarity* as the "cornerstone of Russia's foreign policy philosophy"⁴¹ naturally accommodates global regions as poles of power or spheres of influence. In this sense, Russia's post-Soviet "backyard" is seen as capped nicely with Eurasian regionalism. Needless to say, this "realist" notion of regions as poles of power combines poorly with the conventional understandings of European integration as a peace project. In this case European and Eurasian regional integration virtually speak in different languages.

Thus, there is a prominent strand in the discourse on Eurasian integration claiming that Russia is doing essentially the same thing as Europe but more in the spirit of rivalry and potential confrontation than in the spirit of learning or synergy. As I tried to spell out in the conceptual part, there are Russian identitary strategies that combine a sense of both affiliation and confrontation with Europe. Sometimes it may come in the form of representing the Russian self as some kind of a better and truer or more authentic Europe. At other times, the implicit messianic potential evolves into promoting a vision of an alternative Europe or alternative West. In this case Russia proposes a competing universalist normative project that can, nevertheless, be anchored in ideologies with a Western pedigree (e.g. Marxism-Leninism).

It would be now interesting to see to what extent the discourse on Eurasian regionalism reveals these patterns of self-perception. First of all, the theme of

40 *Коммерсант* (2013), 'Россия – единственная держава, готовая противостоять США', 18 September 2013, available from <http://goo.gl/r8oXrK>.

41 Makarychev, A. (2013), 'Russia and "International Democracy": Unlocking the Concept', in Morozov, V. (ed.), *The Idea of Democracy and the Struggle for Hegemony*, Ashagate.

learning from European integration is notably exploited in attempts to demonstrate the superiority of Eurasianism. Vladimir Putin's original article contains a confident remark that Eurasian integration will proceed at a faster pace as compared to the 40 years that elapsed between the original Communities and a full-fledged European Union, exactly because they can see both the "strong" and the "weak" sides of the past experience.⁴² But in subsequent public statements the Russian elite refer to "miscalculations" or "mistakes" made by the EU that have led to a "crisis".⁴³ There is a tendency to frame European integration in some sense as a flawed one and its "Eurasian" alternative as bound to avoid these "flaws". Thus, in the end, the Russian-led Eurasian integration is implicitly presented as an option that is superior to its said European template.

As Stefanie Ortman argues, "the narratives of Russia's virtual democracy and of Russia as hyper-Westphalian Great Power have been foundational narratives of Russia's state identity ever since the emergence of the new Russian state in 1991". Ortman then contends that the image of a nineteenth century sovereign great power put forth by the Putin's regime implied also an assertion of being Europe – "an older Europe, an even the true Europe".⁴⁴ The posture is a familiar one. In the past, the Russian establishment has claimed that "Russia defends European values and the future of all Europe".⁴⁵ In that particular case the values in question were liberal values of human rights, allegedly abused in the Baltic states. Interestingly, Eurasian regionalism has already inspired some debate on values. During a conference organized by the Gorchakov fund of public diplomacy in August 2012 in Nizhny Novgorod, some participants argued that the "Eurasian Union" should become part of the "Greater Europe", also including the European Union and North America. Within this grouping it should play the role of a Conservative Europe that continues to defend the basic values of European civilization.⁴⁶ Strictly speaking, these debates lay outside elite discourse that is addressed in this paper. But the recent developments in Russia, such as the infamous "punk prayer" trial or the so-called anti-gay laws, do suggest that Kremlin is adopting a more conservative or anti-liberal policy course in terms of social values. It remains to be seen whether the discourse on the Eurasian regionalism will stabilize as a more value-laden and containing some sort of a doctrine of Eurasian anti-liberalism.

42 *Известия* (2011), op. cit.

43 *Голос России* (2012a), op. cit.; *Голос России* (2012c), 'Евразийское пространство смотрит в будущее', 21 May 2012, available from <http://goo.gl/olGjlp>.

44 Ortman, S. (2011), op. cit.

45 Boris Gryzlov as cited in Makarychev, A. (2013), op. cit.

46 *Голос России* (2012d), 'Элитные коммуникации Евразийского проекта', 10 August 2012, available from <http://goo.gl/D1ruAd>.

The theme of being a “better Europe” can, thus, be discerned in the discourse on Eurasian regionalism. But what of “alternative Europe” or “alternative West” in the sense of putting forth an alternative universalist ideology? The region as a spatially limited notion of course sets certain limits to any potential messianic doctrine that could operate on a global scale. There are occasional attempts to plug the Russian self into a more universalist definition by manipulating with the notions of Europe and Eurasia. Thus, Sergey Naryshkin, Chairman of the State Duma, claimed that “European integration from the historical point of view is an integral part of Eurasian integration, as Europe is part of the Eurasian continent.”⁴⁷ These claims are roughly in the same vein as the doctrine of identity with the abstract “Greater Europe.”⁴⁸ In practice it implies that Russia likes being called Europe, but reserves for itself the right to have a stake in defining what “Europe” is really about and to shun any definitions that would impose unwanted norms and standards on her political elites.

The discourse on Eurasian regionalism does articulate a global scale vision, though. It tries to sell the future “Eurasian Union” as a building block of the emerging global economic governance. To cite Putin: “Today it is evident that the crisis that erupted in 2008 had a structural nature. Today we still see its relapses. The root of the problems is in the global imbalances. At the same time, the processes of finding new post-crisis models of global development is a very difficult one...” and “In our opinion the solution could be to develop common approaches in a “bottom-up” way. First [it should take place] inside established regional structures like the EU, NAFTA, APEC, ASEAN and other, and then by way of dialog between them. It is out of these integrational “building blocks” that a more stable world economy can be assembled.”⁴⁹

In a similar vein, Tatyana Valovaya contends that for today’s global governance “the optimal way is regionalization. Because only creating large regional players that are able to take decisions and effectively implement them will allow us to overcome political fragmentation.”⁵⁰ Another member of the Russian political elite,

47 *Голос России* (2013), ‘Нарышкин: Евразийский союз призван играть ключевую роль в мировой политике’, 12 June 2013, available from <http://goo.gl/6lEamk>.

48 Much in the same spirit, Andrei Klimov stressed that “we understand very well that the so-called “Greater Europe” is not the European Union or the Council of Europe, it is a great civilizational space from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. The space of the “Greater Europe” de facto consists of two integrational centers. One integrational center is in Brussels, and the other is inside the triangle of the countries which includes Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.”, *Голос России* (2012e), ‘Андрей Климов: “Евразийского союза, в отличие от Европейского союза, пока нет, это только идея”’, 21 May 2012, available from <http://goo.gl/gCSPNc>.

49 *Известия* (2011), op. cit.

50 *Невское время* (2013), ‘Евразийский союз – это встраивание в глобальную экономику’, 21 June 2013, available from <http://goo.gl/nd9f0h>.

Mikhail Slipenchuk, deputy chairman of a Duma committee, prefers to speak of a potential “global Eurasian economic cluster”.⁵¹

For the Russian elites, playing the regionalist card looks naturally attractive for several reasons. It allows to re-cast the image of a “Eurasianised” Russia as a keynote global player with a legitimate stake in re-defining the post-crisis economic world order. And it fits nicely into the doctrine of “multipolarity” helping to cement Russia’s claims on its post-Soviet “backyard” via a new international doctrine. However, the international legitimacy of this claim would depend, at least in part, on the recognition awarded by peer regional groupings that form the emerging global architecture.

INTERREGIONALISM, RECOGNITION AND THE FUTURE OF THE EURASIAN INTEGRATION DISCOURSE

The issue of recognition introduces a dialogical aspect to the study of identity formation. “Uses of the Other” are made to produce definitions of the self. But responses of the Other to these definitions may be no less important. Recognition or, absence thereof by the Other, can re-enforce or inhibit identity patterns and inform policy choices. International recognition can also be an important source of domestic legitimacy. The source of recognition is important. We seek recognition first and foremost from those whom we respect, our peers or our superiors, although recognition coming from inferiors also shapes our identity.⁵²

To what extent then Eurasian regionalism and its emergent institutions have sought to be recognized and who are the “significant others” granting or withholding their recognition? The existing literature points out to the mutually legitimizing and identity-stabilizing aspects of region-to-region partnerships.⁵³ Following this logic, the architects of Eurasian regional integration should make its global interregionalist dimension as broad and diverse as possible. However, despite the declared global orientation of Eurasian integration there still seems to be a latent Eurocentrism in it, insofar as it remains driven by a hidden concern about the West. This is empirically confirmed by the prioritizing of “significant others” from whom

51 *Голос России* (2012f). ‘У России есть шанс стать центром создания Евразийского глобального политического и экономического кластера’, 21 May 2012, available from <http://goo.gl/MOCL8q>.

52 Ringmar, E. (2002), *op. cit.*

53 See for example: Lenz, T. (2008), ‘Problematising the EU’s Model Export to Mercosur– Strategies and Motivations’, *Paper prepared for the GARNET conference “The European Union in International Affairs” Brussels, 24–26 April 2008*, available from <http://goo.gl/OWTb6T>; Hardacre, A. and Smith, M. (2009), ‘The EU And The Diplomacy Of Complex Interregionalism’, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 167–188.

recognition and equal partnership status is sought. Had the project been driven primarily by the intention to establish a global dimension of interregionalism, one would expect a more active stance towards establishing partnerships with other regional blocks, together forming the architecture of a “decentered globalism”⁵⁴ and diluting the symbolic importance of the European Union. Instead, at least on the discursive level, there seems to be a fixation on obtaining recognition from one regional block while others serve at best as a background.

Fedortsev contends that “the Customs Union seeks active partners not only in the post-Soviet space but around the world, and has held preliminary talks and negotiations on a common free-trade zone with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), New Zealand, Vietnam, and a number of other states.”⁵⁵ It may be too early to draw conclusions, but the evidence of the Eurasian Custom Union’s interregional ties outside of Europe has so far not been impressive. For instance, the 2012 APEC summit in Vladivostok, despite all its grandeur, did not bring any breakthroughs in this respect as one might have expected. However, what can be immediately observed is a desire to have the emergent Eurasian institutions recognized by the European Union. Thus, at a press conference following the last EU-Russia summit in June 2013, Putin urged the European Commission to establish “direct ties” with the European Economic Commission.⁵⁶ The priority of establishing inter-regional cooperation with Europe had also been emphasized by the Russian ambassador to Brussels Vladimir Chizhov who stated “the imperative need to establish dialogue with other integration projects, above all with the European Union.”⁵⁷ Hopes for interregional cooperation have also been voiced by various members of the Russian establishment.

If we accept that concern about Europe is the primary underpinning of Moscow’s Eurasian endeavours then the prioritizing of “significant others” should not be too hard to predict. Both in terms of immediate strategy and broader identity implications, winning recognition from the European Union is pivotal for architects of a “Eurasian Union”. First of all, as I have already argued, Eurasian regionalism depends on its “otherings” of Europe for its key self-definitions. This includes the attempts to mimic the language and certain organizational forms of European

54 Buzan, B. (2011), ‘A World Without Superpowers: de-centered globalism’, *Lecture delivered at Sheikh Zayed Theatre, London School of Economics, 10 May 2011*, available from <http://goo.gl/HzY7Lx>.

55 Fedortsev, V (2013), op. cit.

56 Putin, V. (2013), op. cit.

57 Chizhov, V. (2012), ‘Impact of the Eurasian Integration on Russia-EU Relations’, *Statement by Ambassador Vladimir Chizhov at the conference organised jointly by the Valdai Club, the German Foreign Policy Society (DGAP) and the French Institute for International Relations (IFRI) “The new Eurasian Union integration process. How should the European Union react?”*, Berlin, 15 June 2012, available from <http://goo.gl/NQ9WRn>.

integration. So some sort of a confirmation of the legitimacy of these self-descriptions coming from the EU would be crucial. But there is dependence even in terms of spatial delineation, in so far as Eurasian regionalism tries to re-define the political space in Europe, placing the post-Soviet countries of the “shared neighborhood” within a would-be Eurasian region. Regions as such are never given, but are socially and discursively constructed through “constitutive speech acts”.⁵⁸ The articulations of Eurasian regionalism are attempts to construct a region out of the space that Moscow, speaking in more classical terms, considers to be its “sphere of influence” or “backyard”. But the legitimacy of this spatial re-definition ultimately depends on Europe’s acquiescence, on the recognition of this space as a “region” that is in some way analogous to the region where European integration is taking place.

An article that the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov recently published in the *Journal of Common Market Studies* cites a former French minister and a member of the European Parliament Rachida Dati: “Don’t wave the red rag of a new cold war, a bloc against a bloc. We must work for a union of unions, an alliance of the European Union and the Eurasian Union. Naturally, this cannot happen overnight. But we must have the courage to set such a long-term goal in developing relations with Russia and its Eurasian partners”.⁵⁹ But this rhetoric of a “union of unions” is not mainstream in the EU. Contrary to what Moscow may have hoped for – possibly with respect to the specific French and German position on Russia and Eastern Europe – the overall European reaction to Moscow’s Eurasian project has been rather lukewarm. There is no sign that the EU feels like engaging in interregional partnerships by establishing direct ties with the emergent Eurasian institutions. Instead, it prefers to keep to the bilateral track of relations with Russia and other members of the Eurasian Customs Union and shuns Moscow’s efforts to supplant it with a European-Eurasian interregional track.

As policy analysts argue, hypothetical recognition of a “Eurasian Union” as a legitimate partner would most certainly weaken the EU’s leverage on authoritarian regimes that are members of the Customs Union and boost their bargaining power.⁶⁰ But in terms of the ongoing social construction of political reality it would also mean acquiescence to the re-definition of political space in the shared neighbourhood on Russia’s terms which is politically impossible for the EU. There are good reasons to believe that at least some fans of the “Russia first” approach

58 Neumann, I (1999), op. cit.

59 Lavrov, S. (2013), ‘State of the Union Russia–EU: Prospects for Partnership in the Changing World’, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies Special Issue: The JCMS Annual Review of the European Union in 2012*, vol. 51, issue supplement S1, pp. 6–12.

59 See Vilpišauskas, R. et al. (2012), ‘Eurasian Union: a Challenge for the European Union and Eastern Partnership Countries’, *Eastern European Studies Centre*.

in the so-called old member states would prefer to greet an “Eurasian Union” as a good institutional tool to strike a strategic bargain with the Kremlin and, inter alia, to unload their responsibility for at least parts of the Eastern neighbourhood. But the EU as a whole has already committed itself, through initiatives like the Eastern Partnership, to its own project of re-structuring the neighbourhood. Regardless of whether we look at the EU foreign policy from a normative or realist perspective, there seems to be no place in it for a “Eurasian” region next door.

What then does non-recognition imply? A constructivist approach would assume that there are not only immediate policy implications, but also deeper identity consequences. I started out by arguing that the discourse on Eurasian regional integration is a new one and is thereby transitive and not yet stabilized. Owing to that it demonstrates an eclectic interplay of various and sometimes potentially contradictory notions about Russia’s stance vis-a-vis Europe. Inside this discourse there are possibilities for both synergetic and conflictual interpretations of the Russian self and its European other. But as certain policy choices shape a more definite policy course, the discourse will marginalize those positions that are not compatible with the prevailing ideological notions. The clash of the Eurasian project with the European neighbourhood policies in Ukraine that we are observing is likely to bury any possibility of speaking about a synergy between the two at least in the medium term perspective. If they were to end up on the losing side of a tug-of-war game that they themselves largely initiated, no one in the Russian political elite would risk looking ridiculous by speaking of a “union of unions”. In such a case the discourse will become more conflictual and anti-Western and whatever cooperative and pro-European elements that it had will be marginalized. As I pointed out, there is also a possibility that it will gradually blend with the social conservative trends in Russian politics that are marked by the “punk sermon” trial and the anti-gay propaganda laws, leading to the emergence of an explicitly anti-liberal geopolitical project.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper I tried to argue that from an identity point of view the discourse of Eurasian regionalism fits the expression about old wine being poured in new sacks. There Russian political elites have tried to appropriate a new vocabulary that often relies on concepts and notions used to describe European integration. This can be seen as an extension of the older trend of “ideological free-riding” whereby the current Russian political elite ends up adjusting Western vocabularies to its own political needs. But it also demonstrates a persisting identity dependence that keeps Europe as a reference point for any self-definitions. There is

thus an inherent Eurocentrism even in those versions of Russian identity that assert an insurmountable ontological gap with Europe. Inside the spectrum produced by the “empty signifier” of Europe/the West there are several identity patterns that include thinking of Russia as looking up and learning from its Other, being a peer of its Other, being the “true” and authentic Other and substituting as an alternative for its Other (articulating an alternative universal normative project).

These patterns play out, albeit to a different extent, in the discourse of Eurasian regionalism. The theme of parity is emphasized and the theme of looking up and submissive learning is tuned down, although a degree of Eurocentrism is still present in the use of the European experience as a primary reference point. There is also a strong theme of superiority and authenticity whereby European integration is presented as in some way flawed and its Eurasian alternative is said to be better in avoiding its mistakes. Additionally, there is a universalist posture that comes in two variants. Firstly, there are some marginal attempts to re-define European integration as part of a greater (Eurasian or Greater European) complex of regional integration processes where Russia plays an equal role to Europe. Secondly, there is a vision of a regionalized post-crisis world order in which the idea of a Eurasian regionalism is used to reposition Russia globally as one of the poles of this order.

I have also suggested that the recent nature of the discourse has allowed a somewhat freer and more spontaneous interplay of the different identity patterns, but the future stabilization of the discourse is likely to bring more straightforward interpretations of Russia’s stance towards Europe. By identifying Eurasian and European integration Russia has sought recognition of the legitimacy of its enterprise from the European Union. However, as this recognition is unlikely to be granted, the discourse on Eurasian regionalism is more likely to stabilize around patterns that emphasize rivalry with the EU and inspire anti-Western attitudes.

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