

# Competitive Regionalism in Eastern Europe? The Regional Organizations' Perceptions of Each Other<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*The article outlines three different logics through which we interpret the interactions between the EU and the EAEU before the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The first logic refers to a neo-Westphalian model of interaction. The second is based on 'new regionalism' and from this perspective, we understand both entities as well as the interactions between them in line with economic interdependence and as responses to economic globalization. The final logic addresses the ideational, normative dimensions and within this model, we examine the EU as a post-Westphalian entity and we elaborate on the ideational underpinnings of the EAEU.*

## Introduction

In a milestone article, Schimmelfennig (2001) explained the EU's early commitment to enlargement to East Central Europe by its rhetorical commitment to a 'pan European' ideology which had been there since the organization's foundation. The Copenhagen European Council in 1993 stated that the associated countries in Central and Eastern Europe 'that so desire shall become members of the European Union' (European Council 1993, 12). The promise from Copenhagen was based on a report coming from the European Commission one year earlier that set the scene for further enlargement and recapitulated that the 'Treaty on European Union provides that any European State whose system of government is founded on the principle of democracy may apply to become a member of the Union' (European Commission, 1992).

Schimmelfennig's argument remains credible when it comes to the enlargement process towards Central Eastern Europe completed by the enlargement waves of 2004 and 2007 and entails some credibility regarding the continued enlargement to the so-called Western Balkans where a similar promise of enlargement perspective was made in Thessaloniki in 2003. However, despite the rhetorical commitment a large part of Europe was for a long time not seriously considered for EU accession. The then-recently independent countries of the dissolving Soviet Union were not considered in the Commission's report on enlargement in 1992. With the exception of the Baltic states which applied for membership in 1995 the remaining post-Soviet countries did not receive any membership perspective and were instead included in the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). It was only the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that turned the EU's rhetorical commitment to pan-Europe relevant for the enlargement of the organization to Ukraine and to Moldova and Georgia.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Other potential countries for further enlargement, in particular Armenia, have not opted for EU membership.

In parallel to the EU's expansion to new parts of Europe, in the post-Soviet space, a new type of regionalism emerged. Libman (2019) referred to this as 'holding together' regionalism since it was not the question of integrating previously sovereign states but rather of finding ways of maintaining some level of integration between what used to be parts of one political entity – the Soviet Union. Several regional organizations were created in the post-Soviet space. In particular the Commonwealth of Independent States, initially including all post-Soviet states with the exception of the Baltic states, the Collective Security Treaty organization, and the organization we will primarily discuss within this paper – the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) established in 2015.

The paper examines the interactions between the EU and what would develop into the EAEU in the years before the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. From the perspective of Russia's ongoing and brutal war in Ukraine, it can appear as obvious that the competition in East Central Europe between the two organizations has been between the EU as an embodiment of the liberal world order and the EAEU as a disguise for Russian imperialist revisionism. However, albeit a possible interpretation, if we focus mainly on the EU and Russia as the actors, the logic gets more complicated if we take into account also the smaller countries in the region that often have applied vector policies in relation to the two entities (see, e.g. Vieira and Vasilyan 2018). In the paper, we set out to examine the interactions between the two political entities following three distinctive logics of international relations. According to the first logic, we examine the interactions in accordance with a neo-Westphalian pattern of interactions according to which the main focus of both actors is on the establishment of borders. The second logic examines a new regionalism logic and views the actors as regional organizations engaged in solving issues related to their member states economic interdependence. According to the third and final interaction logic, we look into the role of norms and identity and we scrutinize how and if the EU can be viewed as a post-Westphalian actor, and we also analyze the ideational underpinnings of the EAEU.

Within all three logics, we focus on the EU as an actor. The different logics help us identify different aspects of the organization as an international actor. When it comes to the counterpart within the first logic, we target Russia and view the EAEU only as an extension of Russia's power ambitions. Within the latter two logics, we target the EAEU as the analytical focal point, and while doing so we also consider the perspectives of the smaller member states of this organization. We refer to the EAEU and its predecessors. The EAEU finds its roots in the Customs Union established in 1995 and later developed into the EurAsEC in 2000 and a new Customs Union in 2010 followed by the Common Economic Space in 2012 and the EAEU in 2015. The current member states are Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. The former three countries have been included in all the mentioned integration attempts whereas the latter two have only been parts of some of the projects, and sometimes Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have also been included (for an overview see, e.g. Obydenkova and Libman 2019).

The paper is structured in line with the three different logics of interaction which is then followed by a concluding discussion.

*The EU and the EAEU from a neo-Westphalian perspective – competition about borders*

One of the key attributes of the Westphalian type of state refers to a fixed and relatively hard external border (Zielonka 2001). In parts of the comparative regionalism literature neo-Westphalian has been referred to describe a situation where regions take over some of the attributes of states and interact in a similar way (Hettne 2003). We introduce the term here to illustrate a situation where both the EU and its counterpart Russia act according to a logic where the establishment of borders is important.

In line with the interpretation logic of the first model, we speak of Russia and not of the EAEU. From this perspective, we understand the EAEU in line with a large part of the previous research as a tool for Russian power interests and neo-imperialist ambitions. This literature often takes a starting point in a (neo)-realist view on regional integration that stresses the role of power balancing and/or the strive for regional hegemony (see, e.g., Busygina and Filippov, 2020; Avdaliani, 2018; Entina, 2014; Sergi, 2018). A part of this literature puts the EAEU into the context of geopolitical contestation and attempts by both Russia (EAEU) and China (One Belt, One Road initiative) to develop their specific spheres of influence and as attempts to balance against US influence (see, e.g., Kaczmarek 2017; Sangar, 2017; Libman, 2018; Wilson, 2016), and against Western influence at large including the European Union (Vieira and Vasilyan, 2018; Vasilyan, 2016; Delcour et. al., 2015).

Klinke (2012) examined the EU's approach to Russia and challenged the popular view of the EU as post-Westphalian power that would devote itself to postmodern geopolitics. In his interpretation, when challenged by Russia the EU would 'learn from Russia and embrace precisely what it is lauded for having overcome: traditional (realist) geopolitics' (p. 930). According to observers, there have been several turning points in the development of EU-Russian relations since the end of the Cold War, including the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999, the development of the ENP, the colour revolutions and the establishment of the Eastern Partnership (Morozov 2021, p. 49), and for the latter development most crucially the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP).

Some authors see the EAEU as a direct response to the EaP (see, e.g. Casier 2019). The European Commission warned early that Russia could use regional organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States to enhance its influence in the region (European Commission 2004).<sup>3</sup> The incompatibility of a customs union with individual free trade agreements of the member states of such a union with the EU stresses this point. On the other hand, the first agreement on a Customs union between Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia dates back to 1995.

If we exclude the three Baltic states, the EU's approach to the post-Soviet space has been different compared to the one towards other countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The EU's approach has not provided them with a clear membership perspective until 2022. Yet, the approach has been inspired by membership conditionality and the Copenhagen criteria but without offering the countries the possibility of the final step. The idea was that the three Ms, in other words, market, money and mobility would function as carrots to support domestic reforms in the target countries (Cadier 2015).

If we look at the countries of the EAEU Armenia and Belarus were included in the EU's Eastern Partnership established in 2009. Armenia and Kazakhstan have completed Comprehensive and

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<sup>3</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUri-Serv/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2004:0106:FIN:EN:PDF>

Enhanced Partnership Agreements with the EU. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan have Generalised schemes of preference plus status with the EU. Kyrgyzstan and Russia have signed partnership and cooperation agreements with the EU. Despite the EU's traditional support for multilateralism it has preferred to approach the EAEU countries individually instead of opening direct relations with the EAEU. The EU's Global Strategy from 2016 is an example of this. The EU expresses its general support for multilateralism, and what is labelled 'cooperative regional orders' and other regional organizations are frequently mentioned in the document, Asean 6 times, Ecowas and the African Union twice and Mercosur once. The EAEU, however, is not referred to a single time.

The obvious reason for this neglect, and for why the EU did not open direct relations with the EAEU at its foundation in 2015, is the Russian annexation of Crimea and the inability of Russia to respect the Minsk accords (see, e.g. Kofner and Erokhin 2021). Several times in the period between 2015 and the Russian full-scale invasion attempt in 2022 EU leaders repeated the respect of the Minsk agreements as a condition for opening official contacts between the two organizations. The EU's Russia strategy from 2021 also states that any relations with the EAEU 'beyond technical contacts' are 'conditional on a better political context'.

The President of the European Commission 2015 addressed the Russian president in a letter declaring the possibility of the establishment of closer ties between the EAEU and the EU conditioned on the implementation of the Minsk Accords by Russia (Euractiv 2015). The EU also clarified that the interaction between the EU and the EAEU would only be possible if all EU member states gave their consent. There, however, have since been technical-level meetings between the representation of both commissions and an informal dialogue (Kofner and Erokhin 2021, 265). Analyses also show that the EAEU despite the lack of high-level contacts and official reluctance to implement EU norms largely has adopted increasingly international and European standards (see, e.g., Emerson 2018).

The EU, however, has been sceptical towards economic integration between Russia and its neighbouring countries already prior to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and other military activities in Ukraine in 2014. The EAEU and its predecessors have by the EU been viewed as being political rather than economic, and sometimes described as an attempt to re-establish the Soviet Union (DeBardeleben 2019). The European Commission, for instance, expressed doubts about the Single Economic Space between Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus signed in 2003, and stressed the need to examine the agreement carefully regarding its 'possible impact on work on the Common European Economic Space and on a possible future FTA' (Communication 2004 – on Russia).

EU representatives repeatedly argued that its objection towards the EAEU and other similar projects was not out of political reasons but related to concerns about the respect of rules and in particular regarding WTO obligations (and prior to the Russian WTO accession in 2012, it was frequently stressed that this should be the first step). A senior director of the DG for the external trade of the EC for instance argued that: "We (the EU) do not have any political perceptions or fears of the customs union. The issue is much simpler. We want to work with a customs union which is based in and respects also in practice the WTO obligations" (Balas

2012).<sup>4</sup> The EU was reluctant to engage in direct negotiations with the emerging customs union since at the time Russia and Belarus were not members of the WTO.<sup>5</sup>

Russia, on the other hand, accused the EU of creating a sphere of influence through its EaP strategy. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov for instance argued: ‘We are accused of having spheres of influence. But what is the Eastern Partnership, if not an attempt to extend the EU’s sphere of influence?’ (Gast 2020). On the other hand, in the European descriptions of the EAEU, the focus is often on arguing that ‘the post-2011 Putin approach seeks to restore components of Cold War-style bipolarity’ while using regional integration as a tool to develop a bloc comprised of Soviet successor states headed by Russia and ‘capable of interacting on an equal basis with the institutional Europe of the EU and NATO’ (Mankoff 2009, see also Nikitina 2021). Russian representatives also stressed the need for the EAEU in the context of the changing balance of power across the region in the context of rising powers in Asia Pacific and linked to Chinese initiatives (<https://ria.ru/20190920/1558871965.html>).

It is easy to see how Russia and the EAEU can be understood as (neo)-realist Westphalian actors. But what about the EU, what would be the main arguments for considering the EU a neo-Westphalian actor? The EU has contributed to developing firm borders by excluding some European countries from the membership perspective and at the same time offering solutions that make their positions as in between countries permanent.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, the EaP can clearly be understood in line with a neo-Westphalian power logic. Crucial for this interpretation is how we assess the compatibility of the EAEU and the EaP.

According to a Communication from the European Commission in 2014, the two projects are mutually exclusive since if a country accesses Customs Union with Russia it cannot ‘engage in free trade agreements independently’ and the membership in ‘the Eurasian Customs Union which is incompatible with signing an AA/DCFTA with the EU’ (European Commission 2014).<sup>7</sup> The question, however, is one of who is blocking whom from doing what. According to DG Trade (2014) it was a myth that the agreement with the EU would prevent Ukraine from joining the Russian-led Customs Union and this because the interpretation was reversed. It is the Customs Union with Russia that prevents EaP countries to enter into any other free trade area independently. The EU’s free trade agreements do not have any impact on what other trade agreements a country can enter.

In the policy debates, however, there have been suggestions that an agreement between the EU and the EAEU could solve the problem of harmonizing the idea of countries being part of both an EAEU customs union and DCFTA with the EU (DeBardleben 2019). However, since this has not been a possibility the countries in the region have been forced to make a decision. The most well-examined case is Ukraine in 2013, which also illustrates that membership in the EAEU is not always optional. Armenia opted for EAEU membership and made a radical change in its approach as a consequence of the impossibility of combining both DFTA and EAEU. In 2018 this led to a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU (provisionally in force in 2018) that excludes the free trade agreement.

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<sup>4</sup> In conference proceedings: [GETTING TO PLURALISM: \(carnegieendowment.org\)](https://www.carnegieendowment.org)

<sup>5</sup> Russia accessed the WTO in 2012.

<sup>6</sup> The EU did also not exclude further enlargement to the East even if there were calls for clarifying the Eastern borders of the EU (Miril 2021).

<sup>7</sup> [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/enp/pdf/2014/joint\\_communication\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/enp/pdf/2014/joint_communication_en)

## *Two Competing neo-liberal economic projects and the logic of new regionalism*

Proponents of new regionalism as well as neoliberal institutionalists view regionalization as a response to economic globalization and interdependence. Here we focus on the underlying economic logic in the interaction between the regional entities, the EU and the EAEU. We assume that both entities are organizations consisting of states dealing with problems related to economic interdependence, among others, and that the processes of regionalism in the area also include aspects of regionalization assuming the inclusion of more heterogeneous actors than only the states.

At the beginning of the century proponents of ‘new regionalism’ would view the EU as albeit the leading one, one of many projects of regionalization around the world that developed in response to globalization. Optimist accounts by globalists would interpret it as a positive step towards a more peaceful world order along the lines of liberal thinking and Francis Fukuyama’s end of history thesis (1992), critics would stress how a world of regions would relate to each other in a hierarchical order due to their underlying position in the economic system (Hettne 2003). Within this model, we view the EAEU as a regional economic organization with some similarities with the EU.

Representatives of the EAEU and its member states have often stressed the organization’s commonalities with the EU. The official aim of the EAEU is to integrate its member states into a new economic entity, facilitate the free movement of goods, services, capital and labour, and pursue coordinated, harmonized and single policy in the sectors determined by the Treaty and international agreements of the EAEU (for an overview on the EAEU see, e.g., Chufirin, 2020; Krasnov et al., 2020; Meshkova et al., 2020; Rotaru, 2018; Vinokurov and Libman, 2014). The EAEU is the first among other post-Soviet integration agreements where the member states have pooled their sovereignty in foreign trade (Gast, 2020) and is planning gradual steps in this direction in other economic spheres as well, e.g. regarding energy resources and financial markets (for more details see Zemskova, 2018; and Meshkova et al., 2020, respectively). Yet, when it comes to the institutional structure of the EAEU there are also significant differences. Even if at a first glance the Eurasian Economic Commission can appear similar to the EC of the EU a closer examination reveals the institution’s more intergovernmental structure. A part of the literature on non-democratic regional organizations challenges the possibility of supranational power transfer within such organizations (Obydenkova and Libman 2019).

The official justification of the EAEU referred largely to an economic rationale. This articulation was present already in Vladimir Putin’s frequently quoted article in *Izvestiya* (2011) when he stressed the importance of integration to overcome the ongoing global financial crisis and called on the public and businesses to support the project. Eight years later, the Russian leader stressed the achieved successes and the benefits of collaboration within the Union: “(...) everything [in the Union] functions in the best possible way” (Ria.ru 2019). Such a vision of the EAEU in the official discourse refers to the importance of the project for both microeconomic and macroeconomic development and recommendations on how to boost this integration and overcome the existing challenges. Kazakhstan is often described as a country with an initial leading role within the EAEU, and within that country there is a strong tendency to continuously stress the economic character of EAEU, denouncing any attempts to discuss it as a political integration project (Zakon.kz 2019). The EAEU is described as a “tool” to achieve

economic means and similar arguments can be found in all EAEU countries (for a discussion, Braun et. al. 2023).

Armenia might be a case in point here. Its membership in the EAEU can largely be understood from a perspective of economic interdependence where the EU is simply remote and based on regulations and standards that business elites in the country consider to be difficult to implement. Even if Russian security guarantees, played a role in the country's decision to opt for EAEU accession in 2015, in line with model 2 we can also see a clear economic logic in play. Whereas for instance, Armenian farmers find it difficult to export to the EU, the EAEU offers the possibility to protect some of the country's business interests on the Russian market.<sup>8</sup> Armenia for a long time aimed to pursue a vector policy, but when EU representatives made clear that the country could not do both FTA with the EU and EAEU membership, the country settled for the second option. The four smaller member states of the EAEU have tried to utilize the institutional framework of the institution to protect the countries' economic interests primarily on the Russian market and used it to protect the possibility of for instance labour migration.

In the case of the Central Asian countries, it has been frequently stressed that the countries have special bonds to China and that the EAEU could serve as a bridge between East and West. The former Chair of the lower chamber, the Mazhilis of the Kazakh parliament stressed that 'By combining the economic opportunities of the EAEU member states with China, we can connect the economies of the countries of East and West, Europe and Asia with a transcontinental bridge and become a link that brings countries and peoples together' (Inform.kz 2015). The former ambassador of the EU to Russia, Markus Ederer, urged for increased coordination with Russia and the EAEU to balance against increased Chinese influence in the region (Ederer 2019).

There are different accounts of how much economic integration has been achieved within the EAEU. Critics tend to focus on the moderate level of trade flows between the five countries, proponents, on the other hand, stress its importance in some economic sectors and its relatively high share of trade with highly processed goods (Braun et. al. 2023). Some analyses have also stressed that the case law within the EAEU has developed and in some aspects, the institutions play a greater role than often acknowledged (Karliuk 2017). In particular, the Russian-speaking literature tends to describe the organization as an economic project whereas the international tends to be more sceptical regarding the achievements (see Libman 2019 for an overview).

In the EAEU vocabulary the 'West' is frequently blamed for 'hindering the work of such organizations as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Shanghai Cooperation Organization and The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)' (Ria.ru 2020a). The Russian foreign minister Lavrov described the EAEU as aiming at creating an economic area from 'Lisbon to Vladivostok' or even 'Lisbon to Jakarta' (Vesti 2019). A 'broad integration framework stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific that involves the member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and all other countries of the Eurasian continent, including the EU countries' (RT.ru 2019 ).

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, to protect its Ararat cognac from Russian pirate producers on the Russian market.

The EU's approach towards Russia and the other countries of the EAEU has been based on trade conditionality. Damron (2012) described the EU as a market power that 'actively engages in international affairs through the externalization of its economic and social market-related policies and regulatory measures', and for this reason, he argued, the often exercises power through coercion. In 2003, the EU and Russia agreed on the creation of four common spaces – i.e. a common economic space, a common space of freedom, security and justice, a common space of cooperation in the field of external security as well as a common space of research and education, including culture. The cooperation, however, did not really take off. One problem was the Russian rejection of the EU as a norm setter and the application of EU-based conditionality (DeBardeleben 2022).

In 2010 an attempt was made to speed up the implementation of the economic space through the 'Partnership for Modernisation' (Kofner and Erokhin 2021). It was also during this period the Eurasian Customs Union was established, in 2010, and the Single Economic Space in 2012 including Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. In both cases, the initiatives can be seen against the background of the global financial crisis that started in 2008. Some analysts argue that the Russian economic policies took a liberal turn during Medvedev's presidency from 2008-2012. EU representatives, however, would stress that the language of Russian and other EAEU representatives mimicked EU and universal regionalism rhetoric in a quest for legitimacy. The lacking willingness to conform to WTO and EU standards made EU representatives view the EAEU as a flawed approach to economic regionalism.

In addition, the EU was critical of the sudden changes in the plans related to the Eurasian Customs Union. When the Customs Union was established, Russia proposed that the three countries of the customs union Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan entered the WTO jointly as a block. This was considered unlikely by the EU which pushed for Russia to enter the WTO as soon as possible to use the WTO standards as the basis for interactions between the EAEU and the EU. Russia's difficulties in accessing the WTO were a problem also for earlier attempts to bring Russia closer to the EU's single market. The accession process of Russia to the WTO continued for 18 years before the membership became a reality in 2012 (Haukkalla 2019). Except for Belarus, all the other member states of the EAEU are now members of the WTO.

The new regionalism perspective suggests we should also include non-state actors in the analysis. Even if the economies of the EAEU member states include a larger share of state participation compared to the EU economies, business associations have been active in promoting the economic dimension of the EAEU, for instance through the EAEU Business Council. Business associations within the EU and EAEU member states have tried to promote the idea of a Common Economic Space from Lisbon to Vladivostok (see, e.g. <https://lisbon-vladivostok.pro/>). However, it is also necessary to consider the different kinds of interdependencies in the region. Russia has largely utilized energy assets in EAEU negotiations, which thus are much less issue-to-issue based compared to bargaining within the EU. The same point is obvious in relations between Russia, the EU and single EU member states. In 2016 EU 75 per cent of Russian natural gas export and 60 per cent of its crude oil exports went to the EU, and the revenues from oil and gas contributed to 36 per cent of Russia's government budget (Leonard et. al. 2021). There is thus a high level of interdependence between the entities and the EU's fit for 55 agenda would have a significant negative output on Russia's economy even prior to the latest wave of sanctions.

*A Post-Westphalian logic encounters Westphalian imperialism – the English school, normative power and EU exceptionalism*

In the third model, we examine the possibility of post-Westphalian politics and the role of identity and norm arguments for the interactions between the two entities. In this context, we draw upon the scholarship of the English school and the idea of the development of a solidaristic international society (Buzan 2001). However, even if the EAEU includes elements of supranationalism, if we examine its organizational structure, it is mainly intergovernmental, and it is not possible to discuss the organization in terms of a post-Westphalian entity. Therefore, from this perspective, we investigate the interactions between the two entities as interactions between a potential post-Westphalian entity, the EU, and the EAEU operating according to a Westphalian logic and in both cases target underlying norms and identity issues of relevance for the formation of the two organizations.

Some scholars have interpreted EU – Russian relations as a clash between different ontologies. Whereas Russia is seen as caught up in a modern spatial framework of fixed territory, national identity and traditional geopolitics, the European Union embodies a postmodern spatial mindset that simultaneously reflects and drives the dissolution of sovereign territory (for a critical account, see Klinke 2012; see also Casier 2019). In the literature, it has also been stressed that the EU's inclusive identity enables enlargement and has provided the organization with its strongest foreign policy tool. However, a large part of the literature stressing the importance of the identity argument for enlargement fails to discuss why not all European countries were considered for EU membership.

The EU is widely referred to in the literature as a 'normative power'. It is now 20 years since Manners introduced the concept in an article in the JCMS. The assumption that the EU was a unique international actor due to its genesis and sui generis nature as a multilateral organization becoming an actor in international relations due to regional integration received support not only in academic circles but also among policymakers. The suggestion of Manners corresponded well with works of authors such as Robert Keohane on the EU as a post-Westphalian actor challenging the conventional understanding of sovereignty. Keohane in a JCMS piece (also from 2002) suggested similarly to Manners that a "... result of Europe's conversion to a conception of limited and pooled sovereignty is unambiguously positive for world order. Europe can serve as a model for troubled societies, unable to create order on their own."

The idea of 'normative power Europe' quickly cascaded into the vocabulary of practitioners. The following quotation from the then president of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso is telling. 'It is often said that the EU's comparative advantage lies in its normative power or the power of its values. I think this is right ... the European experience has a great deal to offer the world' (Barroso 2009). The then Commissioner Rehn claimed in 2005 that the EU was 'a postmodern entity: a community of states that have agreed to pool their sovereignties and obey common laws in order to increase their impact in the world'. The Commissioner suggested also that European values are different from that of other actors in international relations and particularly Russia: 'these European values differ from the mindset of spheres of influence currently prevailing in Russia' (European Commission 2005, see also Klinke 2012).

In the literature, it has been widely discussed how far the EU has managed to be a normative power in relation to countries without membership prospects. Russia is a special case since it decided not to participate in the EU's ENP and since there hardly has been any serious discussion on a potential Russian EU membership. Despite this, there was a mutual agreement in the 1990s that Russia belonged to Europe (see e.g. Delcour 2021). Therefore, the EU's approach toward Russia in the 1990s also followed a structure similar to the enlargement pattern. In other words, European leaders expected that Russia would follow the EU's normative lead and transform itself in line with the Copenhagen Criteria (DeBardeleben 2021).

On the surface, the EU's approach to the Eurasian Economic Union corresponds well with the idea of the EU as a 'normative power'. Already in Manners' initial works on the concept, he considered the 'rule of law' as one of the fundamental norms the European Union promotes. After the formation of the Eurasian Customs Union in 2010, EU leaders took a cautious stand on the regional organization being developed in Eurasia due to concerns that the organization would not respect the rule of law (see, e.g. Balas 2012). On the other hand, the EU's approach to the EAEU seems to contradict Manners's (2008) assumption that the EU's origin and nature make it inclined to support multilateral solutions since it has preferred to negotiate individually with the single member states (including Russia) rather than through the EAEU organization.

In the rhetoric, the EAEU is sometimes connected to ideas of Eurasianism, but it has also been argued that the concept was not used in relation to the EAEU by Russian officials in the early days of the EAEU (Laruell 2015). Several interpretations of the concept of Eurasianism view it as constructed in opposition to the West. The origin as a part of the first wave of Russian anti-Westernism in the late 19th century (Sakwa 2015). Others have stressed that the interpretations of the EAEU vary significantly between the member states as do the meanings of Eurasianism as a concept (Heller 2018).

Kotkina (2017) suggested that neo-Eurasianism or Putinist Eurasianism implies the historical and geographical unity of the post-Soviet space and that the concept partly overlaps with that of the *Ruskii Mir* (Russian World) viewing Russia as the centre of a separate civilization (p. 62). A substantial component of this narrative is the linguistic element and the idea that is necessary to preserve the Russian language in the country's 'near abroad' and see those efforts as fundamental for the integrity of the region (Slutsky 2017). Former Kazakh President, Nursultan Nazarbaev is frequently referred to as the initiator of Eurasian integration. In the 1990s he articulated Eurasianism as a concept that was open to different ethnic groups and that rejected any attempt of assimilation and at the time largely as a contribution to Kazakh nation-building (Mostafa 2013; Heller 2018). In Russia, in the 1990s Eurasianism initially was promoted by liberals as an ideology to replace communism. Over time, however, it has increasingly been associated with anti-Westernism and also with the controversial expansionist ideology of Alexander Dugin (Shekhovstov 2017).

Akchurina and Della Sala (2018) argue that the EU is an important reference point for identity building within the EAEU. The EAEU has been seen either as compatible with the EU as a part of establishing a larger economic area, as a competing but in its essence similar project, or as a very different project stressing unique anti-Western features of the EAEU. Pozo (2017) suggests Eurasia as something aspirational and views the concept of Eurasian as referring to something both real and imaginary. That is, it is an 'imagined community of imagined

communities ... of many nations and ethnic groups ... but see themselves as neither Asian nor European' (p. 161).

According to the third logic, we acknowledge that there are competing understandings of the organizations within their member states. In the EU, the EaP was contested as was the idea of further enlargement. Several of the Central European EU member states, such as the Visegrad Group, pushed for both ambitious content to the EaP as well as openness to further enlargement (Braun 2020) whereas for instance, Germany took a more reluctant position on the EaP. Also within the EAEU the smaller countries have pursued different interpretations of the organization in relation to the West and stressed articulations that include openness. The different perceptions of the organization have over time increased particularly after Russia's military involvement in Ukraine in 2014 (Heller 2019).

## Conclusions

The article has outlined three different logics through which we interpret the interactions between the EU and the EAEU before the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The first logic refers to a *neo-Westphalian* model of interaction. The interpretation of the EAEU as an extension of Russian geopolitical power ambitions is in line with a large part of the previous literature on the subject. We, however, show that also the EU's approach to post-Soviet Eastern Europe can be interpreted according to the same logic as a way of establishing firm Eastern borders of the entity. The EU's Eastern Partnership did not give the target countries the perspective of EU membership and at the same time, the approach based on extensive free trade agreements prevented the countries' inclusion into a Russian-led customs union. The approach, thus, served to create a ring of friends that could not become fully a part of any of the contesting political entities.

The second logic is based on 'new regionalism' and from this perspective, we understand both entities as well as the interactions between them in line with economic interdependence and as responses to economic globalization. The EU's approach to the East has been following an economic market logic with attempts to offer all countries of the region, including Russia, the possible participation in an economic space. The EAEU developed and progressed in the context of the global financial crisis beginning in 2008. The new regionalism logic underscores the importance of the in-between states and their economic (as well as security) interdependence. Whereas the first logic ignores the actorness of the smaller counties in the region, the second logic, on the other hand, emphasises it. Armenia is a case in point of a country that has applied a vector policy to balance its dependency on Russia and the EU. As the only relatively democratic member state of the EAEU, and lacking land borders with any other EAEU country, its inclusion has often been interpreted purely in security terms. The economic interdependence, however, shows the cruciality of Russia for the country's economy and the EU's market as being both remote and in legislative terms overly complicated. The four smaller member states of the EAEU have pushed for the development of the organization as a solely economic organization excluding more political elements.

The final logic addresses the ideational, normative dimensions. The EU's commitment to Europe did not generate an enlargement approach to the countries of the EaP. Moreover, despite the predictions of the EU as supporting multilateralism in the world and in particular

regional integration, the EU's approach to Russian-led regionalism was sceptical even prior to 2013. Thus, we find limited evidence of the EU acting as a post-Westphalian entity in its interactions with the EAEU. EAEU representatives refer to Eurasia and Eurasianism as the ideational foundation of the project. Eurasianism is most often today associated with the anti-Western neo-Eurasianism of Alexander Dugin and stresses the uniqueness of the peoples in Eurasia and also Russia's special role. As such the concept of this interpretation is similar to that of Ruskii Mir (Russian World) viewing Russia as the centre of a separate civilization. However, in connection to Eurasian post-Soviet integration, it was the then Kazakh President, Nursultan Nazarbaev who articulated the term in the 1990s and then stressed that the concept was based on openness to different ethnic groups and an idea that rejects any attempt at assimilation. Even if Nazarbaev's approach to Eurasianism should be seen largely as a part of domestic nation building it shows the possibility of Eurasian regionalism that is less Russian-centred.

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