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# Discursive Delegitimation of the Eurasian Economic Union by the European Union

Zhanibek Arynov<sup>1</sup>

Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Public Policy,  
Nazarbayev University

## Introduction

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia is often regarded as the most successful integration project in the Post-Soviet Space (e.g. Dutkiewicz and Sakwa 2014; Evgeny Vinokurov 2018). Indeed, compared to its previous predecessor, the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), the creation of the EAEU had a different dynamic, and was transformed from a customs union into a full-fledged European Union (EU)-like economic union in just five years (Rotaru 2018, 426). Such rapid growth of a new international organization, however, has faced the hurdle of acquiring international recognition. From the very start, the EAEU has been attempting to establish itself as a legitimate international actor through formal political and economic relations with third countries and other similar organizations. It has signed economic and trade agreements with a number of countries, yet observers tend to be skeptical as to whether the majority of the EAEU's existing international agreements carry much political and economic weight (Dragneva and Hartwell 2021, 213–15). But more crucially for the EAEU, the EU, arguably the EAEU's Significant Other (e.g. Furman and Libman 2015; Dragneva and Wolczuk 2015; Vicari 2016), has been reluctant to enter into any formal relationship with it, thus questioning its legitimacy as

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<sup>1</sup> [zhanibek.arynov@nu.edu.kz](mailto:zhanibek.arynov@nu.edu.kz)

an international actor. Such a decision by the official Brussels becomes even more puzzling given that the EU has always been the main advocate and supporter of regional integrations all over the world. It has official relations with ASEAN or MERCOSUR for instance. In this regard, the EAEU, representing the EU's closest neighbor, remains the only exception when the official Brussels demonstrates an unwillingness to institutionalize its relations with it (Kobayashi 2019).

This paper focuses on this puzzle and analyzes the EU's discourse surrounding its (non)engagement with the EAEU. More specifically, it addresses the following research question: how has the EU been discursively representing the EAEU to justify its (non)engagement with the new organization? I argue here that understanding the EU's discursive representation of the EAEU is important for at least two reasons.

Firstly, it is crucial for the EAEU as a new international actor in the making. International Relations theories suggest that external recognition, especially from Significant Others, is essential for actors in order to obtain their desired social identities and play their desired roles. Recognition legitimizes the actor in question and allows it to legitimately enter into a relationship with others and pursue certain objectives. Non-recognition, on the other hand, becomes harmful to its identity and roles and prevents it from entering into equal relations with others in the system (e.g. Taylor 1994; Honneth 1995; Wendt 2003; Lindemann and Ringmar 2012). Consequently, non-recognition and discursive delegitimation of the EAEU by its Significant Other – the EU – becomes a serious obstacle for its international agency.

Secondly, the EU's discursive practice is important for its domestic audience as well. The EU is a highly complex actor with a plethora of different internal voices. When it comes to the issue of cooperation with the EAEU, contradictory views have been articulated by various internal actors. For instance, the Baltic States consistently

opposed any contacts with the EAEU (Kobayashi 2019, 150–54), whereas some member-states such as Austria, as well as representatives from the business community, advocated an economic dialogue between the EU and EAEU (Potemkina 2018). Given this internal complexity, the official Brussels, in order to strengthen its own agency as a unified international actor, has to convince alternative internal voices and domestically justify why it opposes formal relations with its closest neighbor despite positioning itself as the main advocate of regional integrations.

To reveal the EU's representations of the EAEU, the paper analyzes official documents produced by various EU institutions between 2010 and 2021. However, one point needs to be clarified here. Russia's aggressive invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a turning point not only for EU-Russia relations, but also for the potential EU-EAEU dialogue. The EU now has another powerful argument as to why it will not formalize its relations with the EAEU, and this argument is unlikely to receive any internal resistance as it used to do in the past. One could even argue that the formal EU-EAEU dialogue has no perspective anymore. By fully acknowledging the potential consequences of the latest developments on EU-EAEU relations, the paper still focuses on the EU's discursive representations of the EAEU before the start of Russia's aggression as this aggression is still continuing and it is still too early to observe its tangible impact. The analysis of EU documents between 2010 and 2021 reveals that the EU has been articulating three dominant representations of the EAEU: (1) a protectionist union; (2) Russia's (geo)political project; and (3) a normatively backward union. These negative representations allowed the EU to delegitimize many actions of the EAEU, justify its non-engagement with the latter, as well as to put forward certain preconditions to be satisfied by the EAEU in order to establish formal relations between the two integrations.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: the next section briefly introduces the literature on the importance of recognition in International Relations to build the theoretical basis of the paper. This is followed by the discussion of EU-EAEU relations, where I will elaborate on why the EU should be considered as the EAEU's Significant Other, and review the current state of EU-EAEU relations. Section four then outlines the data and method used for the analysis. The empirical findings of the paper are presented in section five, where I scrutinize what narratives the EU uses to justify its non-engagement with the EAEU, and how these narratives have changed over time. Finally, the last section offers brief concluding remarks and speculates on the future of EU-EAEU relations after Russia's war against Ukraine.

### **Recognition in International Relations**

In International Relations theories, it is commonly acknowledged that the way actors are recognized by other actors in the system is critical. Taylor (1994, 25) famously argued that

our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.

Wendt (2003, 511) further continues that 'it is through recognition by the Other that one is constituted as a Self in the first place'. In other words, recognition from others is a necessary condition for becoming a legitimate member of the international community. It allows actors to acquire their desired identities and play their desired roles in the system, and an actor's needs and rights associated with those identities and roles are acknowledged as legitimate by others,. Especially, recognition from Significant Others is of particular importance here. By contrast, non/mis-recognition delegitimizes an

actor's desired needs and rights and prevents it from entering into an equal relationship with others in the system. These generally imply that international actors care not only about their physical survival and material interests, as rationalist theories would argue, but also about their social status in the system. In that sense, 'recognition literally [is] a matter of life and death' (Gustafsson 2016, 255). In case of non/mis-recognition, actors may even start a war to acquire the desired recognition from others (Murray 2019).

Recognition theorists commonly distinguish between thin and thick recognition. Thin recognition occurs when the actor in question is accepted by others as an independent subject of the international system. Therefore, it is about the very agency and juridical status of being a sovereign actor with legitimate needs and rights (Wendt 2003, 511). Thick recognition, by contrast, relates to the acknowledgment of the actor's special or unique identity. The question here is not about whether an actor is a legitimate member of the international community, but rather is about whether it has a legitimate difference from others, for example, as a great power (Russia) or a *sui generis* actor (EU) (Wendt 2003, 511–12). Gustafson (2016, 258–59) further conceptualizes that denial of thin recognition should be interpreted as *non*-recognition as it is a denial of membership in the international community, whereas denial of thick recognition should be conceived as *mis*-recognition as an actor is recognized in a way that is different from its self-representation. The last point to be emphasized is that recognition and non/mis-recognition are not two alternative poles; they are rather two ends of a long continuum (Geis et al. 2015, 16).

### **The EAEU and the EU: Denial of Recognition from the Significant Other?**

Although the EAEU officially entered into force in January 2015, it can be argued that its creation started with the signing of the Eurasian Customs Union treaty by Belarus,

Kazakhstan, and Russia, which formally entered into force on January 2010. This was followed by the creation of the Single Economic Space of the three countries starting from January 2012. Finally, a union treaty was signed in May 2014, which officially launched the EAEU starting from January 1, 2015. The following day Armenia joined the EAEU, whereas Kyrgyzstan officially became a full member of the union in August 2015, making it a union of five states.

There are still heated debates around the EAEU. It is widely considered as Russia's 'ideological project' (Sakwa 2015), 'identity project' (Moldashev and Aslam 2015), or, most commonly, 'geopolitical project' (Popescu 2014; Kirkham 2016; Sergi 2018). Opinions on its successes or failures are also heterogeneous. Many tend to agree that despite some achievements (Evgeny Vinokurov 2018), the EAEU still suffers from visible shortcomings given its weak institutions, internal economic imbalance, and diverging motives of member-states (Roberts et al. 2014; Dragneva and Wolczuk 2017; Dragneva and Hartwell 2022). There is also the issue of internal legitimacy, when skepticism towards the union, created by the top-down approach of the will of presidents of member-states only, has been growing among the populations of some member-states (Nursha 2014; Evgeny Vinokurov 2018, 27; Tolegenov 2020). This has become especially visible in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan after Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022 as calls to suspend the membership in the EAEU have intensified among certain groups in these countries (e.g. Satpayev 2022).

But more importantly for the purpose of this paper, no significant achievements can hardly be reported concerning the EAEU's international relations. The EAEU has signed economic and trade agreements with a number of states including Vietnam, Iran, China, Singapore, and Serbia. Moreover, the EAEU's cooperation with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and ASEAN has also been on the agenda. However, the

economic and political significance of those agreements has been questioned (Dragneva and Hartwell 2021). But more crucial here is not the superficial character of the EAEU's existing international agreements, but the absence of any formalized relations with its Western counterparts, above all, with the EU – the EAEU's Significant Other. As argued in the previous section, recognition from Significant Others is particularly important for the agency of international actors.

At its inception, the EAEU highly emulated the EU as the Significant Other, at the same time it differentiated itself from the EU. For instance, newspaper articles by all three presidents of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia, published in *Izvestiya* in October 2011, contained extensive references to the EU and its integration experience, whereas cooperation with the EU was presented as instrumental for creating a single economic space 'from Lisbon to Vladivostok'. As the minister of the Eurasian Economic Commission Tatiana Valovaya later acknowledged, 'the history of Eurasian integration is actually an attempt to build something similar to the EU' (cited in Dragneva and Wolczuk 2017, 5). The EAEU's mimicking of the EU was also visible in its practices. Observers claim that the EAEU followed the EU model in terms of the integration agenda, sequence of integration steps, organizational structure and functions of internal institutions, as well as harmonization of product standards (Furman and Libman 2015; Dragneva and Wolczuk 2015; Vicari 2016; Emerson and Kofner 2018; Libman 2019). Libman (2019) summarizes that such extensive emulation can be explained by the interplay of several factors: (1) general EU-centrism and the perception of the EU as the only legitimate way of building integration projects; (2) the perception of the EU as the most successful integration project (see also Arynov 2021); (3) the effect of socialization of EAEU member-states with the EU given their geographical, economic,



and even cultural proximity (also Furman and Libman 2015, 185); and (4) the EU itself offered support to other regional projects to make its experience more attractive.

At the same time, we can also observe how the EAEU distinguishes itself from the EU. Returning to the articles by the founding presidents, Putin (2011) wrote that the EAEU sees all the weaknesses of the EU, and will avoid its mistakes to create a more efficient integration in a much shorter time span. Moreover, despite certain institutional and practical similarities between the EAEU and EU, a more thorough comparison reveals substantial differences between them, including the depth of integration, absence/presence of democratic decision-making, and power (as)symmetry between member-states, among others (see also Karliuk 2015; Di Gregorio 2017; Rotaru 2018). In this regard, some authors even argue that the EAEU is an attempt to create a model of regionalism alternative to the EU (Dragneva and Hartwell 2022).

Given the significance of the EU as a reference point, both emulated and differentiated from the Self, the EAEU expressed serious interest in establishing formal relations with it. In the same article in *Izvestiya*, Putin (2011) repeatedly framed cooperation between the two organizations as a necessary condition for the continental economic development, whereas Nazarbayev (2011) wrote that the EAEU ‘cannot be imagined without broad cooperation [...] with the European Union’. The latter also consistently tried the role of a broker to organize an EAEU-EU high-level forum, but all attempts failed. Only expert-level technical meetings and some unofficial forums and conferences have been possible between the two organizations so far.

The scholarly opinions regarding the EU’s formal non-engagement with the EAEU are divided. Some agreed that such recognition of the EAEU by the EU, especially after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, was impossible as the EAEU was perceived as Moscow’s geopolitical vehicle for dominance in the shared

neighborhood (e.g. Dragneva and Wolczuk 2012, 2015; Dobbs 2015; Delcour and Wolczuk 2017; Dragneva 2019). Others saw the EU's non-engagement as counter-productive from the economic point of view. They advocated EU engagement with the EAEU on relatively minor and non-sensitive issues, and argued that such cooperation might later spill over to other sectors and help to overcome the existing political and ideological divide in the future (Libman and Vinokurov 2012; Krastev and Leonard 2014; E Vinokurov et al. 2016; Vasileva 2017; Dienes 2018; Van der Togt 2020).

This discussion, overall, shows that the EU has been a reference point or Significant Other for the EAEU, but, as a Significant Other, it has denied formal recognition to the EAEU, which has a crucial effect on the agency of the latter. In this context, the central aim of this paper is to analyse *how* the EU has been discursively justifying this non-engagement for its heterogeneous domestic audience, as well as for the EAEU and broader international community given its self-prescribed identity of integration-promoter.

## **Data and Method**

When one talks about recognition and non/mis-recognition in International Relations, a logical question that has methodological implications is that of how we recognize recognition and non/mis-recognition when we see it. It is argued that the 'recognition theory has not yet successfully developed a method for recognising recognition' (Gustafsson 2016, 256). Nevertheless, it can be suggested that there are two general ways of inferring (non/mis)recognition. First, we can infer it from what actors actually *do*. For example, Ringmar (2014) demonstrates how diplomatic and trade policies of the same actor may vary towards recognized and non-recognized actors. Second, we can observe (non/mis)recognition from what actors *say*. Actors have to discursively explain

their actions and provide certain meanings to them. In turn, discursive articulations influence the boundaries of what those actors can do in practice. In other words, deeds and words are of equal significance and co-constitutive of each other. Having said that, this paper focuses on discursive practices only, i.e. how the EU discursively represents the EAEU. As argued above, the EU has to give meaning to its non-engagement with the EAEU, and answer the ‘why’ questions, both domestically and internationally.

A source of data for this paper is official documents adopted by central institutions of the EU. The EU is a highly complex entity, thus some internal actors within the EU may articulate different messages related to the EAEU. While acknowledging the whole complexity of ‘the EU-produced discourse’, it is also argued that messages coming from Brussels represent the official consensus within the EU despite internal heterogeneity. Therefore, this paper focuses only on narratives coming from central institutions.

Official documents produced by the central institutions of the EU - the Council, the Commission, the European External Action Service, and the European Parliament – were retrieved from the European Council’s document database (Consilium) and EUR-Lex. A full-text document search for the keyword ‘Eurasian’ was conducted on both websites for the period from January 1, 2010 to December 31, 2021. After this, the content of each identified document was checked to see whether the keyword ‘Eurasian’ in those documents actually referred to the EAEU or other topics. As a result, the vast majority of documents found were excluded from the final sample as they did not relate to the EAEU but related, for example, to ‘Eurasia’ as a geographic space or to animal/bird species with the ‘Eurasian’ prefix. Moreover, some of the documents had duplicates presented to various EU institutions and those duplicates were also excluded.

As a result, 40 documents directly related to the EAEU and/or the Eurasian Customs Union were selected for the analysis.

The collected documents were analysed through qualitative content analysis, which allowed not only to identify the main themes in the EU's representation of the EAEU, but also a deeper interpretation of the meaning of those discursive representations (see Mayring 2015). The coding of the data was done through NVIVO software. The coding was done inductively, i.e. codes or themes were developed from the raw data. As a result, three main representations of the EAEU by the EU emerged from the data. The section below discusses them in detail.

### **The EAEU in the eyes of the EU**

To begin with, it needs to be noted that the EAEU has not been a key discussion topic for the EU since the former's inception. The number of EAEU-related EU documents found in the electronic archives of the latter remains limited. Not one single document was found that was fully dedicated to the EAEU and extensively elaborated on the EU's approach to it. Generally, the EAEU is briefly mentioned in the context of other topics such as trade barriers imposed by external actors, EU-Russia relations, and the EU's Eastern Neighborhood and/or Central Asian policy among others. In some cases, those parts which included some discussion of the EU's approach to the EAEU have been removed from the documents and are not publicly accessible (e.g. 2012-OD-01). This was somewhat different from the author's initial expectations in terms of the amount of data to be analyzed and, to an extent, is surprising given the geographical proximity of the two unions, the level of economic cooperation between the EU and EAEU member-states, as well as the latter's constant aspiration to formalize the EU-EAEU relationship. Furthermore, another interesting, yet arguably unsurprising, general observation is that

the EAEU has been predominantly perceived by the EU through the prism of Russia and its interests. The EAEU has been mostly treated as an extension of Moscow's foreign policy instruments. In other words, the subjectivity of the EAEU and its member states other than Russia is hardly visible in EU documents. As a result, the majority of analyzed documents are dominated by the EU's concerns regarding Russia, and consequently, regarding the EAEU.

The analysis of EU official documents allowed us to identify the three main representations of the EAEU in the EU discourse. From the economic perspective, the EAEU is represented as a protectionist union that constantly introduces trade barriers. From the geopolitical angle, it is perceived as Russia's geopolitical project to dominate the Eastern Neighborhood countries and other parts of the former Soviet Union. Finally, from the normative aspect, the EAEU is represented as a backward union, which, on the one hand, does not respect the existing international rules, and, on the other hand, cannot offer its member states a normative upgrade in terms of democracy and human rights unlike the EU. Such skeptical, or even negative, representations are used to justify why the EU cannot extend its engagement with the EAEU beyond expert-level technical consultations.

### ***The EAEU as a 'Protectionist Union'***

The most salient and consistent representation of the EAEU by the EU over time is that of a 'protectionist union'. This encompasses the economic dimension of the EU-articulated representations. The main content of this representation is that the EAEU uses various mechanisms, including those that contradict already agreed rules and standards within the World Trade Organization (WTO), to protect its own market from the inflow of goods from EU member states. EU official documents constantly reiterate

that ‘the [European] Commission is [...] concerned by the application of trade defense actions by the Eurasian Economic Commission’ (2014-OD-04). It is articulated that

Russian/Customs Union SPS measures and their implementation remain unpredictable, non transparent, discriminatory, disproportionate, scientifically unjustified and not in line with international standards and norms. These measures appear to constitute disguised trade restrictions aimed at protecting Russian domestic production from foreign imports (2012-OD-01).

As illustrated by the last sentence of the quotation, such protective measures applied by the EAEU are prescribed to Russia, whereas the agency of the EAEU as an international actor of its own, or of other members of the EAEU, is hardly recognized in the context of protectionism vis-à-vis the EU. Accordingly, all EU pretensions regarding trade barriers between the EU and EAEU are directed towards the Russian authorities. These problems created by Russia and the EAEU are said to be economically sensitive for the EU. For example, in a document from 2014, the EU confirms that protective measures imposed by the EAEU ‘could have the most negative impact on EU exports’ compared to similar measures imposed by other countries like Brazil, India, or Turkey ‘due to the size of the market, geographical proximity and historical trade flows’ between the EU and EAEU (2014-OD-04). Consequently, the EAEU is harming the economic interests of the EU, as represented by the official Brussels. Such a representation of the EAEU as a ‘protectionist union’ contradicts the EAEU’s own self-representation as a trade facilitator between its member-states, as well as a proponent of the ‘integration of integrations’.

### ***The EAEU as a ‘(Geo)Political Project’***

From the (geo)political angle, the EU represents the EAEU as a vehicle to satisfy Russia’s geopolitical ambitions in the post-Soviet area, which is hardly surprising as

such narratives in the Western political and academic discourse have been chasing the EAEU from its very beginning (e.g. Popescu 2014; Kirkham 2016; Sergi 2018). The EU articulates that the ‘Eurasian integration and extension of this Customs Union into a Eurasian Economic Union is a major external *political priority* for the Russian leadership’ (2012-OD-01, author’s emphasis). As in the previous case, the EAEU is viewed through the prism of Moscow’s geopolitical interests and the agency of the other members of the EAEU is not visible in the EU discourse. In some cases, membership of some countries in the EAEU is seen partly as a consequence of Russia’s geopolitical pressure. For instance, in one of the documents, it reads that

the Russian pressure most recently faced by Eastern Partnership countries progressing on the road to Association Agreements, including [...] security-related threats with respect to Armenia, which are aimed at forcing the Eastern Partnership countries not to sign or initial the Association Agreements or DCFTAs but instead to join the Russian-led Customs Union, has put them in a precarious position as a result of geopolitical constraints to which they should not be subject (2013-OD-08).

In another document, the EU claims that ‘Belarus and Armenia *do not have full sovereignty* in conducting their trade policy as it is done by [a] supranational executive body – the Eurasian Economic Commission’ (2018-OD-01, author’s emphasis). Technically, one can agree that by joining the EAEU, member states delegate certain functions to supra-national bodies like the Eurasian Economic Commission. But the way that the EU frames it as something that limits national sovereignty in the case of Belarus and Armenia, thus arguably providing a more negative connotation, seems striking given the EU’s own long history of building and advocating supra-national institutions. The EU constantly reiterates that it generally supports regional integrations ‘as long as partner countries are allowed to choose freely which of the organizations to join’ (2015-OD-08). Again, the very fact of touching upon the issue of ‘free choice’ is

indicative of Brussels' deep concerns related to Russia's assertive policy within and beyond the EAEU.

Furthermore, what concerns the EU is not only the fact of Russia's geopolitical assertiveness, but also what consequences such policy has on the EU and its external policy. It is clear from the numerous documents that the EU sees it as harming its own interests in the Eastern Neighborhood Countries: 'the emergence and expansion of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) have influenced the degree of EU engagement with the countries in the region', admits the European Commission (2016-OD-01). Although the EU insists that the EAEU should not be seen as a 'competing' actor by the EU (2015-OD-04), its rhetoric still suggests that the (perceived) geopolitical competition from Russia/EAEU is a bold topic on Brussels' agenda.

### ***The EAEU as a 'Normatively Backward' Entity***

Finally and arguably less visibly compared to the previous cases, the EAEU is represented as a normatively backward entity by the EU. The EU's self-representation as a normative power is a well-discussed topic in academia (e.g. Manners 2002). As a normative power, the EU always emphasizes that its policies are not only driven and regulated by certain norms, but the promotion of those 'universal' norms to other places is an aim itself.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, it is not surprising that norm-related narratives appear in EU's representation of the EAEU as well.

On the one hand, one can notice that the EAEU or, more precisely its member states, are represented as the autocratic regime, which allows little space for democratic and human rights norms. In that sense, the EAEU is represented as a normatively

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in Article 2 of the Treaty of Lisbon, it is stated that 'in its relations with the wider world, the Union shall uphold and promote its values and interests and contribute to the protection of its citizen'.



inferior institution compared to the EU, who can offer to potential member and partner countries something very important that the former cannot offer:

an Association Agreement with the EU entails political and legal reforms conducive to strengthening the rule of law, reducing corruption and securing greater respect for human rights; whereas joining the Customs Union, on the contrary, does not involve any values-based benchmarks or conditionalities, and therefore cannot be considered as an incentive to domestic reform (2013-OD-08).

On the other hand, the image of the EAEU as a ‘normatively backward’ integration speaks back to the image of the ‘protectionist union’ above. From this angle, the EAEU is represented as an unreliable rule-breaker, who does not respect the agreed commitments, and who keeps creating ‘numerous horizontal and sector-specific barriers to trade, [...] which largely remain incompatible with modern international rules and standards’ (2014-OD-01). Very often, ‘EU standards’ are equated to ‘international standards’, which gives an argument to the EU that the EAEU/Russia violates international standards, but not EU’s internal ones. As all members of the EAEU except Belarus are members of the WTO, it is the WTO commitments that the EAEU and its member states (above all Russia) are accused of violating: ‘in a number of areas Russia is not respecting its WTO-commitments. [...] The Commission will need to consider all available means to make Russia respect its commitments and WTO-rules, including use of the dispute settlement system (2012-OD-01). Such a negative representations of the EAEU from the normative aspect gives the EU another argument why it cannot fully engage with it, especially given Brussels own self-representation as a norm promoter and defender.

### *The EU's (Non)Engagement of the EAEU*

Representations of the EAEU as a protectionist union, Russia's (geo)political project, and a normatively backward entity allows the EU to justify why it cannot fully engage with it. The EU admits that 'the power of attraction of this creation [EAEU] depends inter alia on international willingness to engage with the newly created institutions' (2012-OD-01). Therefore, in the context of mostly skeptical perceptions of the EAEU, the EU could not fully engage with, and, thus, legitimize it. Instead, the bilateral relationship between the two integrations is limited to technical consultations related to trade regulations. Rhetorically, the EU never denied that the cooperation could extend beyond technical consultations. For instance, the former Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighborhood Policy, Štefan Füle, claimed that 'the EU would work with its neighbors to find ways of maximizing the compatibility between the European Union and Eurasian structures in a way that facilitates trade and economic integration' (2013-OD-07). Similarly, the European Parliament's resolution from 2015 stated that 'efforts should be made in order to improve cooperation and make the two economic areas compatible' (2015-OD-08). But in practice, the official Brussels puts forward certain preconditions for cooperation beyond technical level consultations. And those preconditions are closely tied to the three representations of the EAEU discussed above.

As a precondition for closer integration with the EU, the Eurasian Economic Union must be fully based on WTO principles and rules, and should help remove barriers to deeper economic cooperation. It must also fully respect the sovereign and autonomous decisions of States to decide on their participation, and should not create obstacles to trade between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union members (2015-OD-01).

This quotation includes references to all three representations of the EAEU above: abiding by certain normative commitments, abandoning the policy of economic

protectionism, and giving up the policy of geopolitical pressure on others. The same narratives have been articulated until as recently as 2021 (for example, see 2021-OD-01).

### **Concluding Remarks**

As we can observe, the EU has been consistently representing the EAEU in more negative tones from the very beginning. If initially, the EU was mostly talking about the protectionist policy of the EAEU, which arguably was a relatively solvable issue, from around 2013 onwards the image of the EAEU as Russia's geopolitical project became visible in Brussels' discourse. This was triggered by developments in the Eastern Neighborhood countries amid their decision to sign an Association Agreement with the EU or to get closer to the EAEU, and later exacerbated by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. In parallel, the EU was also framing the EAEU as a normatively backward entity, which goes back to its long-lasting stance in relation to authoritarian members of the EAEU, including Russia. In this context, the EU could not seriously discuss the possibility of establishing a union-to-union relationship with the EAEU, limiting itself to a technical level consultation only. At the same time, rhetorically, the EU has kept the door open for a hypothetical formal engagement with the EAEU should certain preconditions be satisfied. However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has arguably closed that door for many years ahead. At this stage, it is impossible to imagine that the EU will seriously discuss any issue related to deeper cooperation between the two unions. Moreover, even the future of technical level consultations also looks questionable in the context of massive EU sanctions against Russia. This implies that the external legitimacy of the EAEU will remain questionable, at least in the eyes of Western actors. Such lack of external legitimacy may overlap with growing internal

skepticism towards the EAEU's performance as an economic union in certain member states, triggered both by economic difficulties in those states, as well as their fear of Russia's external behavior. In other words, the EAEU, which initially hoped to become a breakthrough integration project for its member states, may face the fate of its predecessors and slowly transform back into a formal institution with limited authority in practice.

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