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Article

# The Crisis of the Multilateral Order in Eurasia: Authoritarian Regionalism and Its Limits

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## Abstract

The process of authoritarian regionalism, where illiberal or similarly restrictive governments undertake a process of economic integration amongst each other, has emerged in the past two decades as a rival to existing liberal multilateral organisations. Emblematic of this approach is the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU), a grouping of post-Soviet states which has borrowed heavily from the experience of the EU but has set itself up as an alternative form of regionalism. Using the concept of institutional resilience, this article shows how the EaEU has been buffeted by three major shocks that have reduced its attractiveness as a viable development alternative to the West. Crises of economic integration, regional security, and, above all, of domestic stability have exposed the reality that the EaEU may be highly susceptible to shocks and, as a result, is less attractive as an alternative developmental model.

## Keywords

authoritarian regionalism; Eurasian Economic Union; illiberalism; integration; resilience; Russia

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

The crisis of the Western liberal international order has been the subject of extensive debates over the last decade (e.g., Ikenberry, 2018). One of its contributing factors has been the rise of alternative centres of power seeking to challenge US hegemony and herald the arrival of a new, polycentric world (Szewczyk, 2019). Notably, this challenge to the West has come almost uniformly from illiberal governments, such as Russia and China, spearheading a process described as “authoritarian regionalism” (Libman & Vinokurov, 2018). Authoritarian regionalism is a process where “shared ideas, norms, and beliefs” provide “a framework for some limited regional cooperation with a common discourse that is sharply at odds with the lib-

eral norms that underpin most of Western theories of regionalism” (Lewis, 2018, p. 119). This approach uses a vehicle—regional economic integration—that was originally devised as a way to extend economic cooperation and, especially in the variant utilised for the EU, to encourage democracy (Pevehouse, 2002). Rather than seeking to encourage political liberalisation via broader economic liberalisation, however, authoritarian regionalism uses regime-friendly economic transactions and strategic cooperation to bolster authoritarian political structures.

The Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU)—consisting of Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan—has been at the forefront of such an attempt at authoritarian regionalism (Libman & Obydenkova, 2018), seeking to create an alternative power pole from

the West via ambitious economic integration across the post-Soviet region. Comprised of mainly authoritarian countries, the EaEU's integration into an economic area has progressed at a brisk pace relative to earlier attempts at economic integration globally. But beyond integration as a goal in itself, the EaEU has aspired to be much more than just a common economic space, presenting itself as a constructive global actor in domestic and regional relations in Eurasia and beyond; perhaps most importantly, it has also been positioned by member states (and above all, Russia), as a new development model, distinct from—and of course superior to—the liberal structures of the West (Sakwa, 2016).

Despite its lofty ambitions, however, this Eurasian regional order has struggled to deliver on even the economic development objectives it originally aspired to—despite its impressive speed in creating economic integration—making its desire to be an alternative model problematic, to say the least. The EaEU has to this point encouraged mild internal economic liberalisation, economies of scale, and some harmonisation of standards across members, but has stopped short of creating effective supranational economic institutions in pursuit of growth-friendly policies. Indeed, in line with the theory of authoritarian regionalism, the transactional nature of the integration which has been undertaken across Eurasia has, in reality, served purely as a way to provide economic cover for political stagnation: Thus far, the trading bloc has avoided broader market-determined liberalisation and instead has opted for controlled trade dealings playing to the existing strengths of the member states and, not uncoincidentally, the sectors most important to the ruling elite (Dragneva & Hartwell, 2021). Rather than transcending the liberal international order, the EaEU has moved on a very small scale to merely tweak economic relations underneath it. In this sense, the larger project of providing an alternative to the EU or other international organisations has been subordinated to preserving internal political stability.

This brand of regionalism has had a further deleterious consequence, undermining the member states of the EaEU in their resilience to external shocks, making them more susceptible to domestic and regional crises. A variety of economic and structural determinants of vulnerability to shocks can be identified in the literature. However, it can be argued that “institutions are critical because the structure and functioning of institutional arrangements are key to social and economic system's resilience both with respect to natural disasters and endogenous social-economic developments” (Algica & Tarco, 2014, p. 54). While “institutional resilience” is a complex concept, here we refer to the ability of a system to react and change to adapt to challenges and/or “avoid drifting along slippery slopes” towards critical thresholds (Algica & Tarco, 2014, p. 56). In this context, responsiveness depends on the ability to develop and reform rules, but also on institutional design more broadly. Notably, scholars have underscored the problems arising from

“missing or failed institutions” or “scale mismatches between institutions” (Constanza et al., 2001, p. 11).

Undoubtedly, crises resulting from factors such as regional conflicts, the global pandemic, or political polarisation have magnified the tensions faced by existing multilateral institutions. Yet, this is an area that exposes the Eurasian model as a particularly poor alternative. In line with the theory of institutional resilience just outlined, we attribute the weakness and vulnerability of Russia's alternative regionalism as embodied in the EaEU (Vasilyeva & Lagutina, 2016) to the contradictions and fault-lines inherent in its institutional edifice, focusing on its institutional orderings as the cause of its inability to challenge existing multilateral institutions. Notably, Eurasian institutions have represented mimicry of existing liberal institutional arrangements (mainly the EU) rather than transcendence, constituting what philosopher Baudrillard (1983) called a simulation of the third order: a series of symbols and signs which have no real meaning behind them, but which are accepted as true because they simulate reality. On the one hand, as argued elsewhere, the EaEU has heavily emulated the cooperative institutions of the EU as well as its ostensible goals, aiming for a similarly “deep” economic integration through the achievement of a common market and regulatory harmonisation (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2015; Karliuk, 2017; Petrov & Kalinichenko, 2016). This imitation has been at the root of Russia's neo-revisionist project, with its “desire to emulate the most successful of the existing powers” driven by the “demand of recognition and respect” (Sakwa, 2015, p. 65). Indeed, Russia's integration-oriented elites saw borrowing from the EU as a matter of prestige and modernity given its image as the most advanced amongst the regional templates available internationally (Valovaya, 2012).

On the other hand, institutional borrowing has been selective and shallow, ultimately overshadowed by the hegemonic and authoritarian nature of Eurasian regionalism. On the face of it, the EaEU operates through a set of common bodies, including an EU-style permanent regulator and a Court, based on a set of delegated powers envisaged in a comprehensive founding agreement, the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union (sometimes also referred to as the Astana Treaty) of 2014. In practice, the EaEU's institutional edifice has shown concerted action giving way to unconstrained unilateralism and common rules remaining weak and undeveloped in preference for uncertain political deals in pursuit of non-liberal goals both economically and politically. This emphasis consolidated both an unsustainable economic model (reliance on state-owned and politically connected firms) and a rigid political system (authoritarianism) subjected to periodic and possibly catastrophic shocks. In sum, the resulting regime, a *mélange* of liberal institutions matched to illiberal ends, does not match the ambition of the project. Given their lack of function in either encouraging resilience or fostering a robust integration, the EaEU's institutions have not allowed for the creation

of a “Eurasian model” of development, nor have they provided a new pattern of cooperation between member states.

This article contributes to the existing literature by examining the crisis of Eurasian regionalism, how the EaEU’s lack of resilience has stymied its ability to become an alternative to the West, increasing vulnerabilities rather than reducing them. We examine this lack of resilience with a focus on the institutional forms adopted by the EaEU, their mismatch with the declared objectives of deep integration and development, and ultimate deployment to achieve substitute goals. In this sense, the article is not meant to provide a comparative analysis of the EU and the EaEU, but instead to show how the EaEU’s own goals and its current institutional setup have affected resilience. Whereas the comparison of the EU and the EaEU has been done before, exploring the limits of authoritarian regionalism in this context is a novel approach. Additionally, the aim here is not to engage in a comprehensive discussion of EaEU institutions, which has been undertaken elsewhere (Dragneva, 2018; Hartwell, 2013; Karliuk, 2017; Kofner, 2019), but to point out how the imperatives inherent in Eurasian regionalism limit the options for adjustment and reform. Ultimately, like a building in an earthquake, the rigidity of the system is its weakness. We then demonstrate how these institutional features translate into vulnerabilities regarding three recent yet illustrative examples: the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, managing the regional conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and responding to domestic political instability in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and, most recently, in Kazakhstan.

## 2. Institutions for Resilience?

As pointed out, for Russia, imitating EU institutions has been an important aspect of both its region-building and its geopolitical strategy (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2015; Karliuk, 2017; Petrov & Kalinichenko, 2016), a strategy which has manifested itself in the construction of the EaEU. The reason behind such mimicry is that the EU’s architecture, grounded in developed rule-based cooperative institutions in pursuit of liberal goals, provides a blueprint for not only generating economic gains, but also economic resilience. The benefits of integration along the European model are many, but it is worth pointing out some key advantages. The effective pursuit of deep economic integration has resulted in economies of scale, providing a larger economic space for diversification (and, in the case of the EU, a series of inter-governmental procedures and transfers which can rescue faltering members). This enlarging of the common economic space but with continued high levels of diversification in production and specialisation allows for high levels of resilience against shocks (that is, removing barriers while facilitating pass-through), while the institutional basis of transfers also helps to mitigate against shocks becoming more generalized or deeper. Moreover,

as a meta-organisation (Ahrne et al., 2016), the EU also allows for delegated responsibilities to utilize a larger base of resources in response to a crisis. Finally, a series of effective supranational institutions can coordinate responses to external shocks or, even better, marshal the will to enact proactive policies which can guard against future shocks.

However, the EU is also tangible proof that crises can exacerbate internal differences within a meta-organisational framework, as a supranational grouping like the EU is bound together generally by a narrowly circumscribed group of interests (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016)—and if a crisis occurs which is situated beyond these basic foundational principles, it can severely divide the organisation. A crisis can deepen fault-lines across members, making it even more difficult to coalesce around activities where consensus may exist (König et al., 2012), generating backlash and policies which may hinder recovery rather than help (Kerwer, 2013). This occurred across EU member states with the eurozone crisis of 2009–2011, where the desired policy goal of the euro came into conflict with the fiscal policies needed to support it (which had no unanimity in the bloc) and which has led to a “two-track” Europe (Salines et al., 2012) and spawned additional turbulence (such as Brexit and the immigration crisis).

In theory, the EaEU should also offer benefits for member states as the EU was able to do in the decades before the global financial crisis, pooling resources and creating a space for resilience. Moreover, unlike the EU, saddled with a common currency that can act as a transmission mechanism for external shocks, the diversity of each country’s economic structure—and the disparate business cycles within the EaEU—can provide a buffer against such shocks. Finally, economic integration among sovereign states but without political unification can mean a degree of policy experimentation at various levels predicated on problem-solving, as is seen in treating sub-national units as laboratories for policy innovation (Morehouse & Jewell, 2004).

However, the EaEU faces disadvantages in realizing the benefits and avoiding the pitfalls demonstrated by the EU’s economic integration processes and thus becoming a credible alternative to the established international order. The EaEU has been plagued by a combination of weak and undeveloped common institutions, feeding into a growing propensity for unilateral action and stagnating domestic institutions, with direct implications for the developmental potential and resilience of the system.

### 2.1. Weak Common Institutions

Effective common institutions are fundamental for “deep” integration but also for facilitating adaptive responses to the crisis. At its launch in 2015, the EaEU consolidated the previously disparate legal and institutional basis of integration and sought to advance it by

forming an international organisation dedicated to the creation of “a common market for goods, services, capital and labour within the EAEU” and “the comprehensive modernisation, cooperation and competitiveness of national economies within the global economy” (Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union, Article 4). In doing so, it set up a system of common bodies, operating based on powers delegated by its member states. Yet, these bodies have little autonomy and authority outside the context of politicised interstate bargaining, often escalated to the highest level of domestic political power.

The highest bodies of the EaEU (the Supreme Economic Council, meeting at the level of heads of state, and the Intergovernmental Council, meeting at the level of heads of government) operate on a strict intergovernmental basis, whereby their decisions are taken by consensus across member state governments. The organisation also benefits from a permanent regulator, the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC), at least in principle modelled on the EU Commission (Karliuk, 2017; Petrov & Kalinichenko, 2016). The EEC possesses significant powers about tariff and customs regulation, the adoption of technical standards, and the imposition of external trade measures. This can potentially allow it to drive integration and expedite decision-making, especially about the more technical aspects of integration, but also facilitate the adoption of cooperative responses to external events. This ability, however, is undermined both in law and in practice.

This is because commitments in several areas, such as services, transport, or agricultural policy, are limited, with decisions on cooperation ultimately reserved for the member states. About these reserved powers, the EEC performs primarily the facilitating function of an international secretariat. Even in areas of core integration, however, the common regime is often incomplete, characterised by gaps or extensive references to national legislation (Sedik et al., 2017). While this may be the by-product of the brisk speed of integration, it also reflects the institutional preferences of the EaEU member states. As the drafting of the Astana Treaty coincided with Russia’s annexation of Crimea and operations in Eastern Ukraine, sovereignty sensitivities were reignited. Kazakhstan and Belarus formally aligned with Russia’s narrative but sought to limit the scope of integration, enshrine looser commitments, and generally seek widespread guarantees to their independence (Dragneva, 2018; Vieira, 2016).

Given the limited formal commitments of member states, there is little that the Commission can do to push member states into action and develop further the common regime. Indeed, in its assessment, progress in developing technical standards, for example, has been plagued by the delays and the tokenistic attitudes of EaEU member states (EEK, 2019). The problems have been even more notable in instances of high sensitivity and discord, such as the use of temporary sanitary and phytosanitary measures. This is an area where

the regime is distinctly decentralised, with important gaps in the development of common standards allowing for inconsistencies and divergence in interpretation. The commission has attempted to help adopt new rules and develop the regime by promoting member states’ dialogue and adopting a succession of plans, programs, and roadmaps. Yet, this has made little difference, with roadmaps becoming “the EaEU’s favourite method of kicking things into the long grass” (Eurasianet, 2020).

Furthermore, any decision of the EEC can be challenged before the higher bodies of the organisation by a member state which disagrees with it, with the effect that such a decision is revoked or reversed. This reinforces the hierarchical nature of integration and the prevalence of interstate bargaining in all areas of cooperation. Indeed, “against such an institutional background, the Commission has often found itself being forced to tread cautiously and conservatively” (Dragneva & Hartwell, 2021, p. 13).

Thus, as argued, “the EaEU is very much limited to reproducing sovereignty rather than transforming it, marking a clear disconnect between rhetoric and reality” of pursuing deep economic integration (Roberts & Moshes, 2016, p. 542). This lack of fit between institutional form and economic function opens a fault-line likely to be even more pronounced in instances when a rapid response to shocks is needed and/or when the interests of member states diverge.

## 2.2. Weak Constraints on Unilateral Action

Given the weak and fragmented common regime, the propensity of member states to diverge in their practices and deviate from commitments is unsurprising, with the potential to deepen even more at times of crisis. This feature is reinforced by the weak monitoring and enforcement powers of the commission, especially concerning the creation of the common market (Sedik et al., 2017). There is little that the commission can do in cases of infringements of obligations, other than issue notifications. Its powers vis-à-vis member states in such cases were curtailed with the Astana Treaty, removing its ability to bring a country before the Court of the EaEU (Dragneva, 2018). At the same time, while inter-state disputes can be brought before the court, their decisions are non-binding. Indeed, the Astana Treaty also restricted the court’s competencies but also its independence from member states, thereby reducing its incentives for bold judicial action (Karliuk, 2017).

In effect, there is little to prevent unilateral departures from the common regime, other than the pressure exerted at the highest political level. Yet, given the highly asymmetric distribution of power within the EaEU, such pressure rarely applies to Russia. This was aptly demonstrated when, in the absence of an EaEU authorisation of the import trade bans on the EU, Ukraine, and some other countries in the aftermath of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Russia proceeded with them unilaterally.

The consequence of this action was the fragmentation of the internal functioning of the Customs Union, including the reintroduction of border customs and sanitary controls (Kofner, 2019). This episode demonstrated Russia's willingness to sacrifice the economic goals and achievements of the EaEU in pursuit of its geopolitical objectives and the inability of the EaEU regime to constrain it, even concerning core areas of integration. While Russia's actions are perfectly logical from a realist point of view, they influence the overall credibility of the regional regime, reinforcing the prominence of national interest in interstate dealings. It also demonstrated that the mere presence of a crisis (even if precipitated by one of the member states) is enough to vitiate any of the mechanisms which could have contributed to mitigating the effects of the crisis across the EaEU.

### 2.3. Domestic Capacity

Given the predominant intergovernmental mode of operation of the EaEU, its progress and viability depend critically on domestic action. To a large extent, this is a matter of capacity both to make an input into policymaking as well as ensure effective implementation. This is not a uniquely Eurasian problem but determines the effectiveness of any deeper trade arrangements. Tackling domestic regulatory barriers to trade can stimulate developmental reforms but equally impose costs and divert resources, or simply stall when captured by protectionist lobbies (Chauffour & Maur, 2011). Yet, this is an area of weakness in the Eurasian context, thereby contributing to the overall vulnerability of the project.

Domestic capacity is deemed to be a purely domestic concern within the EaEU. Indeed, the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union (2014, Article 3) seeks to exclude any explicit domestic reform agenda, providing that integration "respects the specificities of the political order of its member states." While the Treaty refers to "modernisation," it is deemed to be the inevitable by-product of integrating economies linked by a range of historical and geographical factors. Indeed, the Eurasian regime does not envisage any redistribution of common resources, which may aid domestic development: It has no EU-like budget whereby customs proceeds, for example, are accumulated in a common fund. Similarly, capacity is not a precondition for accession to the EaEU, even when concerns about implementation exist, as in the case of Kyrgyzstan.

The implications of this dynamic have been amply illustrated in the effort to harmonise regulatory practices in the common market: For example, while veterinary certificates are subject to mutual recognition across the EaEU, limited capacity, as well as corrupt practices affecting the national agencies for inspection and certification, has undermined the effectiveness of the system (Dragneva, 2021). This has been a particular problem for Russia, which has battled a boom in contraband trade with sanctioned goods tolerated by Belarusian author-

ities. In the absence of a developed common regime, Russia has put unilateral pressure on Minsk, relying on President Lukashenko's ability to impose discipline in line with his established system of patronage and control.

Rather than promoting domestic reform, Eurasian integration has the effect of reinforcing the existing patterns of authoritarian or highly illiberal domestic practices. While the EaEU does not explicitly aim at autocracy promotion (Libman & Obydenkova, 2019), it helps stabilise domestic authoritarian regimes and insulate them from the need for reform. This conclusion can be reached for several reasons. It is because of the formal set-up of the EaEU, which as noted, replicates domestic executive hierarchies in its mode of operation, with ultimate power vested in the countries' authoritarian leaders, subject to the highly limited reach of the common regime. It is also because of the extent to which the flaws in the common regime provide a wide policy margin for domestic actors to pursue their own goals (Delcour, 2018). Finally, it results from the political power dynamic characterising the launch and the operation of the EaEU, as discussed below.

### 2.4. Interstate Bargaining and Its Limits

Despite the claim for the EaEU to represent a well-institutionalised regime, the ultimate glue behind it is the system of interstate politicised bargaining. In fact, given Russia's massive power preponderance and trade significance in the region, this is very much a hub-and-spoke system of dealings (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2017). This was especially evident at the launch of the EaEU, with Russia winning the loyalties of its partners (arguably except Kazakhstan) through the promise of benefits about security provision, electoral or financial support; this bargaining helped tip the scales in cases where the economic advantages of the EaEU were debatable, as in Armenia, where the costs of the move to the EaEU's higher tariffs were likely to be highly deleterious to the Armenian economy.

This emphasis on authoritarian bargaining reveals that it is not rule-based constraints that structure commitments within the EaEU, based on common integration goals or values, but instead a set of transactional motives linked to the incentives of domestic political elites. As noted above, while the EaEU does not explicitly aspire towards autocracy promotion, this transactional approach is typical of authoritarian regionalism, which redistributes resources among members to support weaker authoritarian rulers (Libman & Obydenkova, 2019). Indeed, in the sociological analysis of Meyer et al. (1997), the EaEU has been an associational organ that has helped preserve the existing facets of the nation-states involved, above all its domestic political structures. The result of this is that rather than generating new development paradigms, the EaEU appeared to assemble an institutional order which provided economic cover for political stagnation.

A valid question may be asked about the extent to which such a regional order may allow for less formalism and greater adaptability in responding to shocks. Yet, as argued above, this adaptability is constrained by the “red lines” of Eurasian integration and, above all, by the motives of Russia as the regional hegemon. These motives have proved to be primarily geopolitical, with the economic advantages of multilateral integration being decidedly minimal, even if non-tariff barriers to trade are removed (Giucci & Mdinardze, 2017). They have often aligned with external stimuli (e.g., the perceived expansion of Euro-Atlantic structures) rather than committed to the demands of integration: Indeed, having secured the launch of the EaEU, Russia has demonstrated little interest in investing in the technocratic intricacies of the common market, focusing its attention to its external relations (Dragneva & Hartwell, 2021). Thus, Russia’s interventions remain uncertain with crises in different countries easily becoming hostage to a wider set of calculations.

### 3. Shocks and Crisis Management in the Eurasian Economic Union

Given these institutional weaknesses within the EaEU and its demonstrable actions to preserve domestic political structures via economic transactions, the question lingers of the ability of the EaEU to achieve its goals as an alternative to liberal world order. Does this pursuit of political stability enable resilience, due to the processes of economic integration, or has the institutional structure adopted—and the fundamentally illiberal goals of the contractual-based integration—made the Eurasian model less effective as a developmental approach? Answering this question is the purpose of this section, examining the resilience of the EaEU during three recent (and major) shocks which have struck at various facets of the institutional order: the Covid-19 pandemic, best thought of as a crisis of declared economic integration goals; the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) war, a crisis of regional security and especially complementary objectives; and the eruption of massive protests across the Eurasian landmass, a fundamental crisis of the illiberal goals that the EaEU is pursuing.

#### 3.1. The Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused grievous damage to institutions globally, but the effect that it had (and continues to have) on EaEU members and the region’s economic integration is extensive. For example, as of the writing of this article, Russia was undergoing a third or fourth wave of cases beginning in June 2021, with daily deaths higher than in any of the previous waves (and excess mortality projected at three times the official death rate from the disease); the wave of deaths which began in June 2021 never returned to a “normal” trajectory but instead levelled off until September 2021, when

it started climbing again. At the same time, Kazakhstan saw a disproportionate number of medical professionals contracting the disease from working the front lines (Yegorov et al., 2021), pointing to problems in the country’s healthcare system.

The policy and mobilisation issues related to Covid-19 have gone far beyond the member states and caused cracks within the EaEU; while health policy was never envisioned to be harmonized throughout the EaEU, the Covid-19 response had distinct trade policy and mobility aspects, reaching directly into the heart of the issue of “deep” integration. This situation was obvious from the first wave, as EaEU member states followed a “go it alone” strategy with very little coordination throughout all of 2020 and saw exacerbated unilateralism rather than multilateralism. Kazakhstan is perhaps the exemplar here, as it enacted a series of start-stop lockdowns of varying effectiveness (Nanovsky et al., 2021) but did it comprehensively and swiftly (Jones & King, 2020), while Belarusian leader Lukashenko denied the existence of the disease (Jonavičius, 2020) and Russia displayed a Soviet-style approach with the secrecy surrounding actual numbers, a total border closure, and a series of small-scale lockdowns (Åslund, 2020).

This haphazard approach could also be seen in the economic response to Covid-19, which was wildly divergent across EaEU members. Unlike the EU and US, which fashioned “relief” packages including direct payments to citizens, Russia avoided such payments in favour of tax holidays and loan guarantees, an approach also favoured by Armenia, who extended loan guarantees to businesses. At the other ends of the spectrum, Kazakhstan went far more restrictive, instituting price controls “on socially significant goods” (but also gave direct payment bonuses to those working in sensitive fields), while Belarus offered some state lease relief but, in tandem with Lukashenko’s denial of the pandemic (and the fact that there was no lockdown), offered no fiscal stimulus of any kind from the outset (Elgin et al., 2020) granted. Finally, Kyrgyzstan combined bits of all these approaches, closing its borders to all but Kyrgyz and Russian citizens, and, realizing its precarious budget situation meant it could not do much, reached out for international (pointedly, not EaEU) financial assistance (Jones & King, 2020).

In each instance, the EaEU was side-lined in favour of member state responses. As Busygina and Filippov (2020, p. 8) noted:

Theoretically one could imagine two options for responding to pandemic: Either Moscow as a hegemon takes the lead in elaborating a common strategy of response and the smaller members accept it, or all the EaEU members jointly coordinate and develop collective responses (policies) to a common challenge. In practice, however, neither of these options has been realized.

In general, there was only a coordinated response after member states had already instituted their restrictive measures: Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan banned exports of several “socially significant” products until their state of emergency was lifted, Russia banned grain exports, and Kyrgyzstan also instituted a far-reaching set of export bans. When the EaEU did finally come together, it was in illiberal unity to solidify these bans on exports of personal protective equipment and other goods outside the bloc, merely moving the member state restrictions to the borders of the EaEU. Other crucial issues within the context of the EaEU, such as labour migration (Armenia and Kyrgyzstan are kept afloat by remittances), were glossed over in favour of national and uncoordinated solutions, without heed of how they would affect other members (King & Zotova, 2020).

### 3.2. Regional Security

Beyond such existential threats as the pandemic has been more “regular” crises, ones which have been festering for decades, in particular, the NK conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Frozen in time since 1994, the issue of NK has been a thorn in the side of the EaEU, as Armenia’s accession was held up by Kazakhstan unless NK was explicitly excluded; as Schenkkan (2014) noted, however, despite promising that NK would be excluded as part of the EaEU’s external borders, immediately after entering the EaEU, Armenia declared that its borders would remain “open,” meaning open trade with NK. Yerevan’s prime motivation for entering the EaEU may be to have guaranteed the independent status of NK with Russian assistance, using Russian assurances as to the deciding factor in favour of EaEU accession (Vasilyan, 2017).

While security is also not part of the formal objectives of the EaEU but is a component of the underlying political bargain for some member states (and thus its attractiveness), any change in the frozen conflict in the mountainous region was bound to cause headaches for the entire EaEU. This was indeed the case as NK flared into a very real military action in late 2020. The speed of Azerbaijani gains, reversing Armenia’s military position from the first war led to a cease-fire which cemented the situation on the ground, making it much more favourable to Azerbaijan than it had been before the war. Besides the human toll of the conflict, threats of political instability in Armenia followed in its wake, with protests against Armenian policymakers for their part in accepting the ceasefire escalating to general strikes, protestors storming the parliament building, and the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and the calling of snap elections for June 2021. Perhaps of more relevance for our examination of the EaEU, the latest paroxysm of violence in the region led to Russian intervention in brokering the cease-fire and the introduction of Russian “peacekeepers,” a situation that put Moscow in the (possibly) uncomfortable position of guaranteeing the mili-

tary gains of a non-EaEU member (Azerbaijan) against an EaEU member (Armenia) while stationing troops in both countries. The studied neutrality of Russia in the conflict has not gone unnoticed in Yerevan, leaving many Armenian politicians to wonder just why they are in the EaEU if such a crucial security goal is ignored by the driver of Eurasian integration.

### 3.3. Political Instability

Autocracies, in general, thrive on projecting the veneer of stability and, indeed, empirically have been shown to be more “stable” in terms of leadership continuity (Tusalem, 2015); however, the stability of autocracies is often disrupted by revolution rather than evolution (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2014), and the most unstable autocracies are those with high levels of political participation (Gates et al., 2006). The EaEU, as a vehicle of authoritarian regionalism, would thus be able to prove its worth to member states if it were able to generate political stability and forestall unrest.

Unfortunately, from the point of view of an authoritarian leader in the EaEU, the past decade has been one of the cracks showing in the autocratic façade. The two largest members of the EaEU, in particular, have been plagued by endemic unrest: Russia has had a series of protests related to political repression in both Khabarovsk and Moscow and a serious political challenge personified in Alexei Navalny, while Kazakhstan saw violent protests regarding changes to its land law in 2016 and, as of this writing (January 2022), underwent large-scale protests against its ossified political institutions (and saw a brief installation of “peacekeeping” troops led by Russia). Although Russia has ridden out the turmoil of its protests for the moment, the Kazakh unrest has been more widespread and—more importantly—has betrayed any sense of “stability” within the country.

This instability has not been limited to the largest members, however. In the Caucasus, Armenia had its own “Velvet Revolution” in 2018 resulting in a change of leadership away from the staunchly pro-Russian Serzh Sargsyan and to a landslide victory for the upstart Pashinyan in June 2021 (being carried back to power in the aforementioned snap elections). But the two largest bouts of instability have come in the third and fourth smallest members (by population) of the EaEU, namely Belarus and Kyrgyzstan. In Belarus, an election widely acknowledged as fraudulent returned President Alexander Lukashenko to power for a sixth term and brought Belarusians into the streets and the opposition leader into the public spotlight. Russia was slow to defend Lukashenko, perhaps seeing him as a liability in the long run, but eventually embraced his “victory” and awarded him a string of high-profile meetings with Putin. Kazakhstan’s government, already worried about Russia’s zeal for “protecting Russians” in other sovereign nations, followed a similar path as it did with the earlier crisis with Ukraine, taking care to not side with the



opposition or overtly criticise Lukashenko, while remaining outside of the fray.

Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, underwent its third revolution in 15 years, with protests in late 2020 resulting in an annulled election and “President-assumed” Sadyr Japarov taking leadership of the country (confirmed in new elections in January 2021). While Japarov is staunchly pro-Russian in his dealings, his turn towards consolidating power in the hands of the Presidency echoes moves of Kurmanbek Bakiyev after the 2005 Tulip Revolution (Bakiyev being deposed after a bloody series of protests in 2010); in any event, Kyrgyzstan remains poised for more political instability, as the underlying issues behind 2005, 2010, and 2020 (mainly the tension between Kyrgyzstan’s urban north and agricultural south) continue to fester (Bond & Koch, 2010; Ryabkov, 2008).

As with the larger members, in each of these cases in the smaller members (Belarus, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan), the mere fact of membership in the EaEU generated very little support for political stabilisation, due in large part to the dynamics between and within member states. An example of this is in Belarus, as the testy relationship between Belarus and Russia in the years immediately preceding the election meant that Kazakhstan or Armenia could only pursue studied neutrality because in many ways it was unclear *who* was standing for *what*. Rather than become engaged with support on any side, the government of Kazakhstan reacted as it had during the Arab Spring (Dorr, 2021), becoming more interested in shoring up its internal position lest something similar happen in Nur-Sultan (or, as it seems to be becoming again, Astana). In this situation, as with Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, EaEU membership not only was unable to assist with overcoming domestic political shocks but may have exacerbated authoritarian—and, by extension, nationalist—tendencies within the EaEU. Under this tendency, the EaEU is becoming less a vehicle for “authoritarian regionalism” and one for solely authoritarian ends, no regionalism required.

#### 4. Conclusions

This article has examined the limits of authoritarian regionalism within the case study of one of its most enthusiastic practitioners, the EaEU. As shown above, the EaEU’s emphasis on economic integration serving political ends has not resulted in a magic elixir for growth, nor has it provided a beacon for other countries to follow; indeed, the formula adhered to by EaEU member states has endangered the viability of the project as an alternative paradigm for both cooperation and development. Its common frameworks have made little difference to the hub-and-spoke, power-based interactions which have occurred internally. As a result, there is little evidence of the EaEU being able to act as a significant actor in restructuring the Eurasian space, with recent events in the region underscores the failings of this exper-

iment (with three of the five members are in a political crisis and the other two facing institutional hysteresis).

Based on this analysis and building on previous work on the external illiberal policies of the EaEU (Dragneva & Hartwell, 2021), we must conclude that the uneasy equilibrium of authoritarian regionalism as embodied in the EaEU cannot offer a coherent development paradigm to rival the West, even if it contains some seeds of possible advances. Put another way, if the EaEU cannot create an institutional structure which can benefit its member states, how can it hope to provide an alternative to established institutional arrangements in the West?

There is a way for the EaEU to offer an improved development paradigm, one which can build resilience within the Eurasian landmass and attract countries from a multilateral order gone stagnant. However, such a shift would require a radical transformation from its current approach of political stability *über alles* and instead towards the building of institutions of a unique and different stripe. These institutions would emphasize effective and actual economic liberalisation, seeking to outperform the EU in terms of liberalisation rather than continuing as a vehicle to entrench state control. The modalities of the institutional layers which would be created could be modelled on a tenet of polycentrism, allowing for flexibility and multiple layers of governance rather than retreating towards a centralized order. Of course, to go this route, the EaEU would necessarily have to abandon its key political support functions, running from “illiberal” means of supporting authoritarian regionalism towards hyper-regional approaches, undertaking policy experimentation akin to that of central Europe in 1989–1994. At the macro level, this would also mean fashioning supranational institutions with a goal of economic—rather than political—stability.

This approach, of offering a true alternative to a multilateral order based on its form of simulation (i.e., endlessly repeating mantras of economic freedom, innovation, and experimentation while building an ossified regulatory state), would require additional changes across Eurasia at the institutional level. Most important of these would be internal changes within member states, opening the domestic political systems of member states to pluralism and, crucially, decentralisation. With the limits of authoritarian regionalism reached, it is only via an institutional reform—starting from the regions within the member states and radiating outward to the supranational institutions of the EaEU itself—that economic stagnation can be avoided.

We are under no illusions, however, that this is a plausible path for the EaEU so long as it is focused on political continuity first and foremost. Any reform would be very difficult for the institutional orderings such as those existing in the member states of the EaEU, borrowed from the EU and utilized for far different ends, and it is more likely that the authoritarian regionalism pursued by the EaEU will continue. Unfortunately, this simulation model will also continue to deliver the results it

accuses the Western model of development of creating: a facilitator of booms, busts, and crises that bring poverty and stagnation.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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