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Dead-Letter Regimes in the Post-Soviet Space: Strategies and Communication

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ABSTRACT

This article explores why dead-letter regimes, sets of norms and institutions with low efficiency and few expectations of tangible output, have become an enduring feature of international politics in the post-Soviet space. It focuses on the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union, the two regional regimes promoted by Russia. The article analyzes their emergence and evolution, normative frameworks, performance and member states' expectations. It argues that, while mostly failing as instruments of strategic action, these regimes have become conduits of communicative action and arenas enabling member states to enact specific international roles.

KEYWORDS

Dead-letter regimes;
Collective Security Treaty
Organization; Eurasian
Economic Union;
communicative action;
strategic action

Introduction

International regimes are classically defined as “sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations”.¹ An off-spring of the neo-liberal paradigm of international theory, the international regime theory aims at explaining cooperation among states without reducing it to the effects of international system and balance-of-power calculations. Among international regimes a peculiar species is to be found known as “dead-letter regimes”. The latter combine a high degree of formalisation of relevant principles, norms, rules and procedures with a low degree of expectations that the norms would be observed.² The opposite of a dead-letter regime is referred to as a full-blown regime.

The concept of dead-letter regime has received scant attention in research literature. Non-compliance of states with regimes' norms and rules has been explained as a consequence of norms being too vague and unbinding, as a manifestation of “opportunistic” behaviour of states who “may negotiate regimes with the intention of breaking them or knowingly exploit others' compliance in order to extract higher payoffs” or as states'

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¹St. Krasner, “Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables”, in St. Krasner (ed.), *International Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 2.

²A. Hasenclever, P. Mayer and V. Rittberger, “Does Regime Robustness Require a Fair Distribution of the Gains from Cooperation?”, in A. Underdal and O.R. Young (eds.), *Regime Consequences: Methodological Challenges and Research Strategies* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004), p. 195.

inability “to sustain commitments because of domestic political constraints”.³ If states enter into regimes intending to ignore or dilute their principles, norms and rules, they probably still have some expectations of them, the ones that would diverge from those enshrined in and engendered by the regimes’ normative frameworks.

Role theory of international politics offers an insight into the expectations that states might connect with participating in regimes with which they are not going to comply. According to Kalevi Holsti, states tend to develop national role conceptions defined as “images” that policymakers have of “the appropriate orientations or functions of their state toward, or in, the external environment”.⁴ The analysis of Holsti’s typology of international roles, a benchmark in much of the literature on role theory, shows that some of states’ roles require more instruments for their enactment than others. Such roles as “faithful ally”, “mediator-integrator” or “regional leader” need more structured “arenas” for performance than the roles of “independent”, “protectee” or “isolate”.⁵ Participation in, or initiation of, international regimes can be conceptualised as a means of role enactment, of conveying an image to international actors.

A striking feature of international politics in the post-Soviet space is the proliferation of dead-letter regimes, sets of norms and institutions with surprisingly low efficiency and few expectations of tangible output. The 1990s saw a profusion of dead-letter regimes in security and economy, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Economic Union, the Central Asian Economic Community and the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This pattern continued into the next decade, with the Russia – Belarus Union State, the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) and the Central Asian Cooperation Organization failing to meet their objectives.

This article focuses on the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the two international regimes Russia has most heavily invested in, both politically and financially. What do participating states expect of these regimes? Do the CSTO and the EEU meet their stated objectives and members’ expectations? Are they dead-letter regimes, full-blown regimes or somewhere in-between these ends of the spectrum? What functions do they perform in inter-state relations? What are the prospects of their evolution? These are the questions this article seeks to explore.

Methodologically, this research relies on the theory of international regimes and on the distinction between the two types of social action, strategic and communicative, introduced by the German philosopher Juergen Habermas.⁶ Strategic action “aims at influencing others for the purpose of achieving some particular end” whereas the goal of communicative action is “to reach an agreement or mutual understanding with one or more actors about something in the world”.⁷ Conveying an image or enacting a role is communicative action. For the purposes of this research strategic and communicative actions are posited as ideal types, ends of “a continuum between a situation where power asymmetry destroys communication completely and a threat-free debate among

³St. Haggard and B. Simmons, “Theories of International Regimes”, *International Organization*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (1987), p. 514.

⁴K. Holsti, “National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy”, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1970), p. 246.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 292.

⁶J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986).

⁷K. Baynes, “The Transcendental Turn: Habermas’s ‘Kantian Pragmatism’”, in F. Rush (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 198.

equals”.⁸ Starting with reconstructions of CSTO’s and EEU’s emergence and evolution, this paper analyses their normative frameworks, performance, member states’ expectations and strategic and communicative functions and proceeds to the evaluation of their prospects.

Collective security treaty organisation: the alliance in decline

Emergence and normative framework

The CSTO evolved out of the Collective Security Treaty (CST) signed by Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Armenia in May 1992. Azerbaijan, Belarus and Georgia joined in 1993. The Treaty established a classic military alliance, its Article 4 stating that an aggression against one signatory shall be considered an aggression against all Treaty participants. If “threats to security, territorial integrity and sovereignty of one or several participating states arise”, the Treaty participants enter into consultations “to coordinate their positions and take measures to remove the threat”.⁹

Throughout the 1990s the CST remained a dead letter. Moscow declared that it sought an efficient defense union based on the Treaty but Russia seemed to be quite indifferent to the CST. Administratively, it remained linked to the fading CIS structures. It produced a number of documents, including the Collective Security Concept providing a long list of military security threats, with international terrorism in the last place. The Concept laid out ambitious plans for the future, such as establishing coalition military formations, a joint air defense system and even the military forces.¹⁰

However, the joint military buildup did not materialise and the CST did not even proceed to setting up its Joint Staff. As the Taliban expanded its control over Afghanistan, foreboding increased pressure on the stability of Central Asian secular regimes, if not a direct threat to the CIS southern borders, Russian and Central Asian officials voiced reminders that the CST remained in force, but no additional Russian military deployments to Central Asia followed. The joint air defense system did not cover Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Another ambitious plan that had never moved forward was the establishment of a joint border-defense space where Russia would protect the CIS borders.

Within the CST contradictions were often sharper than between the alliance members and potential external adversaries. Armenia and Azerbaijan were locked in a conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Georgia was increasingly critical of the CIS (in fact, Russian) peace-keeping operation in Abkhazia and Moscow’s support for Abkhazian and South Ossetian separatism. Uzbekistan was unhappy with Russian policies in Tajikistan where Moscow’s support helped the Kulyab clan to come to power, precluding the Tashkent-linked Khujand clan from regaining dominance.

In April 1999 when the CST’s first five-year term expired Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan refused to extend their participation. The new configuration of the CST shifted its centre of gravity to Central Asia, with a single South Caucasian country

⁸H. Mueller, “Habermas Meets Role Theory: Communicative Action as Role Playing”, in S. Harnisch, C. Frank and H. Maull (eds.), *Role Theory in International Relations: Approaches and Analyses* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 59.

⁹Dogovor o kollektivnoi bezopasnosti [Collective Security Treaty] (15 May 1992), available: <http://www.odkb-csto.org/documents/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=126> (accessed 1 May 2019).

¹⁰Kontseptsiya kollektivnoi bezopasnosti [Collective Security Concept] (10 February 1995), available: <http://www.odkb-csto.org/documents/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=130> (accessed 1 May 2019).

(Armenia) remaining a signatory. The new grouping had no glaring internal contradictions, but lacked cohesiveness.

Putin's ascension to presidency brought about sustained Moscow's effort to transform the CST into an instrument of Russian foreign and security policy. Quite in line with its professional background, the new Russian leadership adhered to a heavily securitised vision of Moscow's interests in the post-Soviet space. "Making multilateral and bilateral cooperation with the CIS member states adequate to the tasks of the country's national security" came to be seen as a foreign policy priority.¹¹ Central Asia was now regarded as the region emanating the most intensive threats to Russian security, second only to the North Caucasus where the second Chechen War was unfolding.

In August 1999 the Islamic Movement's of Uzbekistan (IMU) incursion into the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan showed the vulnerability of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and the weakness of their militaries as well as the growing threats to Uzbekistan. The "Batken events" made these countries more ready to align with Russia, in particular as the latter started demonstrating greater willingness to provide help. Russian military officers were dispatched to southern Kyrgyzstan and an uneasy rapprochement began between Moscow and the Uzbek government.

Escalating threats from the IMU and Afghanistan and enhanced bilateral cooperation with Central Asian states allowed Russia to breathe new life into the CST. In June 2000 the CST participants agreed that weapons and equipment for other parties' military units included into joint military formations should be delivered at the same prices as for national military forces. The CST summit of May 2001 decided to establish the CST's first joint military formation, Rapid Deployment Forces with the personnel of about 1500.

The strategic landscape around Central Asia changed unexpectedly after 9/11. Facing the imminent US war with the Taliban and the deployment of American military bases in Central Asia, Russia tried to convince Central Asians to work out a unified position vis-à-vis the US military presence in the region. Moscow intended to talk to Washington on behalf of its Central Asian allies. However, realising that the US did not need Russian mediation and Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan were keen to seize the opportunity to host US bases even without Moscow's approval, Russia announced that it would support American military deployment to the region. At the same time, Russia made it clear that it saw US military presence in the region as temporary and justified only by the Afghan operation.

The cooperation over Afghanistan brought about a marked easing of tensions in US – Russian and NATO – Russian relations. The CST states felt less pressure to choose between cooperating with Russia and building bridges with the US, which made it easier for Moscow to pursue the transformation of the CST. In May 2002, the CST summit declared that a regional organisation would be established on the basis of the Treaty. A few months later, the CSTO Charter was signed.

The Charter defines the CSTO's objectives as strengthening of "peace, international and regional security and stability" and ensuring "the collective defense of the independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the member States". In a clear departure from the CST, the CSTO Charter makes the Organization's decisions binding on the member states. The signatories undertake to "coordinate their foreign policy positions regarding

¹¹Kontseptsiya natsional'noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii [National Security Concept of the Russian Federation] (10 January 2000), available: <http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/589768> (accessed 1 May 2019).

international and regional security problems” and to “harmonize” the national legislations in the areas of defense and security. The Charter requires that the signatories make decisions on the stationing in their territories of third countries’ military facilities “after holding urgent consultations (reaching agreement) with the other member States”.¹²

Judging by the Charter and regulations on the CSTO’s institutions and bodies, the CSTO is a collective defense regime where the principles and the norms are coherent and formalised, but the rules and the decision-making procedures are blurred and non-transparent. In particular, the crucially important Article 4 virtually hangs in the air, as the procedure for setting it in motion has never been worked out. In the subsequent years, Russia put much effort into developing the CSTO’s normative framework. In 2004 the Organization’s Joint Staff began its operations. In 2005 an agreement on the training of military personnel was signed which included provisions for training officers entirely at the host country’s expense. Then followed a legal framework for the CSTO peace-keeping operations. In 2009 the alliance was endowed with another military tool, the Collective Operative Reaction Forces (CORF) intended to cope with “local” conflicts and terrorist attacks.

The outburst of ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 made Russia initiate a revision of the CSTO norms. The amendments to the 1992 Treaty and the Charter approved in late 2010 included provisions on the CSTO’s “reaction to crisis situations threatening the security, stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty” of the member states.¹³ The CSTO could now deploy the CORF to a member state if it appealed for help in a “crisis situation”, not only in case of an aggression. Along with the military forces, the Organization could use the units of police, security services and border guards. Thus, the CSTO’s mandate was significantly expanded to allow for an interference with internal crises facing the participants. At the same time, the reform weakened the coherence of the CSTO’s normative framework, as rather vague notions of “stability” and “crisis situations” obfuscated a clear concept of external aggression.

Expectations and performance

Initially, Russia saw the CSTO as the would-be “Eurasian NATO”, an alliance underpinning its foreign policy objectives across different regions and globally. Other member states had narrower, regionalised and localised expectations of the CSTO and tried to avoid being dragged into Russia’s cycles of confrontation with the West.

Armenia needed the alliance with Russia as a guarantee that Azerbaijan (probably supported by Turkey) would not resume a war over Karabakh where the 1994 cease-fire fixed a status quo favourable for Yerevan. However, Armenia was actively developing cooperation with NATO, officially regarding the latter, in a glaring contradiction to Moscow’s position, as a factor “reducing threats” to the country’s military security.¹⁴ Blockaded by Azerbaijan and Turkey, Armenia could not afford risking ties to Georgia and displayed no solidarity with Moscow in its confrontation with Tbilisi. At the same

¹²Charter of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (6 October 2002), available: <<http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/3506>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

¹³Ob itogakh provedeniya ocherednoi sessii Soveta kolektivnoi bezopasnosti gosudarstv-chlenov ODKB [On the results of the CSTO Member States’ Collective Security Council Meeting] (10 December 2010), available: <http://www.dkb.gov.ru/year_ten_month_twelve/e.htm> (accessed 1 May 2019).

¹⁴Military Doctrine of the Republic of Armenia (7 February 2007), available: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/155588/ArmeniaMilitaryDoctrine2007_eng.pdf> (accessed 1 May 2019).

time, Armenia, unlike the other CSTO countries, had a keen interest in the Article 4 and was dissatisfied that this provision remained normatively unsubstantiated.

In fact, Belarus and Kazakhstan displayed reluctance even to hint at solidarity with Armenia in case its war with Azerbaijan resumed, with Astana especially active in developing ties with Baku. Fundamentally, Armenia's bilateral alliance with Russia, underpinned by a Russian military base and Russian border guards, was a sufficient guarantee of its strategic interests, the residual political importance of the CSTO lying in the hope that Kazakhstan and Belarus, as Yerevan's *de jure* allies, would be reluctant to support Azerbaijan in international and regional forums.

For *Belarus*, a country whose record of human rights violations and rigged elections was punished by more than a decade of EU and US sanctions,¹⁵ the major danger could come from anti-government protests supported (and, in the government's view, certainly engineered) by the West. A union with Russia was from the outset chosen by the country's perpetual leader, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, as a means of conserving and consolidating the Belarusian political and economic system, anachronistic but quite resilient. As such, the bilateral alliance with Russia in the military and security areas was sufficient for Minsk. The CSTO's added value consisted in it becoming one of the arenas where Minsk could demonstrate its loyalty to Russia or its dissatisfaction with Moscow's policies. Remarkably, while the country's national security strategy tells all the "right" things about "raising the CSTO's efficiency" and making it "the major instrument of collective security in the post-Soviet space",¹⁶ the Belarusian legislation prohibits the involvement of its armed forces in military conflicts beyond its territory. Belarus made it clear that it would never send troops to "hot spots" in the former Soviet Union. In 2009, when Russia banned Belarusian dairy products from its market, allegedly for sanitary reasons, Lukashenka boycotted the CSTO summit, demonstrating his disdain of the entire framework.

Kazakhstan is a strategically vulnerable country with a huge territory unprotected by natural barriers and a low population density. It has long borders with China and southern Central Asian countries, not to mention the world-longest 7600 km. border with Russia. Understandably, as even Kazakh experts close to the government acknowledged,¹⁷ the country was hardly capable of protecting its landmass on its own. The bilateral military alliance with Russia that Kazakhstan had maintained since the very first days of independence, again, seemed to be sufficient, to the extent possible, to address the country's vulnerabilities to external threats. Nevertheless, the CSTO had some residual strategic significance for Kazakhstan as it provided an additional assurance that Russia would intervene in case Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan faced destabilisation, thus relieving Kazakhstan of the burden to cope with these countries' fragilities. Kazakhstan could hope to have some influence over (or at least more information about) Russian policies in Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan if Moscow chose to act there within the CSTO framework.

Despite its CSTO membership, Kazakhstan was actively developing cooperation with NATO and the US. Its military doctrine of 2007 (in force till 2017) referred to meeting

¹⁵Most of the sanctions were suspended in October 2015 to reward Belarus for distancing from Russia and releasing political prisoners.

¹⁶Kontseptsiya natsional'noi bezopasnosti Respubliki Belarus [National Security Concept of the Republic of Belarus] (9 November 2010), available: <<http://kgb.by/ru/ukaz575/>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

¹⁷U. Kasenov, "The Limitations and Conduct of the Foreign Policy of Postcommunist Kazakhstan", in A. Dawisha and K. Dawisha (eds.), *The Making of Foreign Policy in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), pp. 263–264.

“NATO standards” in pursuit of the modernisation of the country’s Armed Forces and to strengthening cooperation with the US.¹⁸ In 2006 the country signed the Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO. Reportedly, Kazakhstan helped Washington to negotiate the extension of the American military base in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁹

Kyrgyzstan, with its small and inefficient military,²⁰ needed an alliance with Russia as a shield against armed incursions from the south, a guarantee of help in case of internal disturbances, and a source of money and ammunition. Paying lip service to the CSTO’s importance, it could not contribute anything to the multilateral security regime nor did it seem to have any expectations from allies other than Russia. While Moscow did help the Kyrgyz military and opened an air base in the country in 2003, Russia clearly separated its own interests from the aspirations of the increasingly voracious Kyrgyz leadership. In February 2009 Kyrgyz President Bakiyev pledged when visiting Moscow that the US military base in Kyrgyzstan would be closed. By what both parties preferred to call a mere coincidence, the visit brought cash inflows from Russia and promises of much more to come. However, a few months later Bishkek, after securing more US money for the base, decided to retain it under the name of the Transit Center. Meanwhile, the negotiations with Moscow on the opening of the second Russian military base in Kyrgyzstan stalled.

Little wonder that when Bakiyev’s regime was violently overthrown in April 2010 there was no support from Russia to the embattled government. On the contrary, Russian officials and media castigated Bakiyev for corruption, finding themselves in an unusual position of solidarity with the revolt against legal authorities. A clear message to disloyal allies was sent.

When ethnic violence engulfed southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, the interim government in Bishkek asked Russia to send peacekeepers to Kyrgyzstan. Moscow, unwilling to meddle with a risky and ambiguous situation unless its strategic region-wide interests were at stake, responded that the violence was Kyrgyzstan’s internal affair and the Kyrgyz leadership “must resolve these problems itself”.²¹ The Russian government referred the matter to the CSTO that became, in this instance, a useful means to let Moscow avoid responsibility for the lack of action. Interestingly, Bishkek was in fact barred from addressing the CSTO directly because the alliance’s Secretary General disagreed with the interim government on who is the country’s legal representative in the CSTO.

The military option was clearly off the table since Russia did not call for the CSTO emergency summit preferring to convene a meeting of secretaries of national security councils. The secretaries promised to help Bishkek with military equipment and material and did not exclude that the situation might necessitate the summit meeting. The interim government retracted the request for peacekeepers but asked Russia to provide troops for the defense of objects like dams and factories. Again, the answer was negative.

Moscow’s response to the Kyrgyz crisis spared Russia human losses, expenses and international criticism. However, the CSTO’s credibility suffered a blow, and the gap

¹⁸Voenneya doktrina Respubliki Kazakhstan [Military Doctrine of the Republic of Kazakhstan] (21 March 2007), available: <<http://www.nomad.su/?a=5-200704120432>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

¹⁹R. Weitz, *Kazakhstan and the New International Politics of Eurasia* (Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2008), p. 125.

²⁰J. Boonstra, E. Marat and V. Axyonova. Security Sector Reform in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: What Role for Europe? p. 14, available: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/165060/EUCAM_WP14_SSR_Kazakhstan_Kyrgyzstan_Tajikistan.pdf> (accessed 26 September 2019).

²¹D. Medvedev, Joint News Conference Following Russian-American Talks (24 June 2010), available: <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/8163>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

between what a small member state and the powerful leader of the alliance expected of the Organisation became glaring. The Russian leadership acknowledged that the CSTO had to be revitalised,²² and the set of amendments to the Charter was endorsed in late 2010.

Tajikistan emerged out of the 1992–1997 civil war as a fractured state where the Russian military contingent ready to support President Rakhmon’s government underpinned a fragile peace settlement. Though gradually getting more entrenched, the regime in Dushanbe remained critically dependent on the Russian military support. With the Afghan civil war showing little prospects of ending and Tajikistan’s relations with Uzbekistan remaining strained over water and border issues, this dependency showed no signs of abating. Russia rebuffed Tajikistan’s sporadic attempts to extract concessions from Moscow and prevented it from going too far in the pursuit of its proclaimed Kazakh-style “multi-vector” foreign policy. Tajikistan demonstrated loyalty to the CSTO, dutifully endorsing all the documents and only once threatening to boycott its summit because of “the energy crisis in the country”,²³ a hint that it expected more Russian support in the row with Uzbekistan over dam constructions. However, what Dushanbe needed was provided by the alliance with Russia; the CSTO hardly added anything, and Tajikistan’s own contribution to the collective military build-up was purely symbolic.

Uzbekistan joined the CSTO in 2006 in what was seen as a major boost to the alliance’s capabilities. After the Andijon events and the Western condemnation of the Uzbek government, followed by American and EU’s sanctions, Tashkent found unwavering support in Moscow. The rapprochement with Russia was not only a signal to the West that isolating Tashkent would be counter-productive. As President Karimov suffered a humiliating foreign policy defeat, the groups in the country’s political and economic elite and security apparatus long dissatisfied by Karimov’s rule awakened to seize the opportunity to curtail the President’s power. At this critical juncture, the Uzbek leader urgently needed support from outside to counterbalance internal challenges to his government.²⁴

The CSTO membership was thus not a reflection of Tashkent’s changed assessment of its security environment and strategic interests but rather a part of a package of concessions it reluctantly made to Russia in return for Moscow’s support. Tashkent’s decision was a means to facilitate communication with Russia by removing the thorny issue of the CSTO membership from the bilateral agenda and handing Moscow a diplomatic victory. Soon Uzbekistan began delaying the ratification of the CSTO agreements, insisting rigorously that they should not be implemented unless ratified. Interestingly, even the treaty on joining the alliance was not ratified by Uzbekistan until 2008. In 2009 Uzbekistan openly broke the CSTO’s ranks when it refused to sign the CORF agreement and voiced strong displeasure with Russian plans to set up a new military base in Kyrgyzstan.²⁵ As the country’s relations with the US improved and the Western sanctions were removed,

²²D. Medvedev, Press Statements following Informal CSTO Summit (30 August 2010), available: <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/8702>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

²³Prezident Tadjikistana otmencil peregovory s Medvedevym i otkazalsya ot uchastiya v sammitakh ODKB i EvrAzES [Tajik President Cancels Negotiations with Medvedev and Refused to Participate in CSTO and EurAsEC Summits] (2 February 2009), available: <<http://www.newsru.com/world/02feb2009/rahmondemo.html>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

²⁴J. Daly, K. Meppen, V. Socor and S.F. Starr, *Anatomy of a Crisis: U.S. – Uzbekistan Relations, 2001 – 2006* (Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2006).

²⁵Uzbekistan ne khochet rossiiskikh voisk v Kirgizii [Uzbekistan Does Not Want Russian Troops in Kyrgyzstan] (3 August 2009), available: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2009/08/090803_uzbekistan_kyrgyzstan_base> (accessed 1 May 2019).

Uzbekistan's contribution to the CSTO was shrinking to a formality. In 2012 Tashkent suspended its membership indefinitely.

No wonder that *Russia's* expectations of the CSTO were frustrated by the Organisation's performance and Moscow's enthusiasm for the alliance was waning. The CSTO's normative framework was undermined by the allies' record of non-compliance. Foreign policy coordination on the key issues of the international agenda did not work, with the allies ready to speak with one voice only on the most generalised principles or matters of secondary importance. Decisions on third countries' military deployments were taken without even token consultations with the other member states, as Kyrgyzstan's renewal of US basing rights demonstrated. No coalition forces ever materialised and the CORF remained the apex of the CSTO military build-up. Moscow's efforts to convince NATO to deal with the CSTO as a collective body, at least on the politically "innocent" issues like combating drug trafficking and illegal migration, failed, as the Atlantic alliance insisted on interacting with the CSTO members on bilateral terms.

In July 2008 the Russian Foreign Policy Concept called the CSTO the "key instrument of maintaining stability and providing security in the CIS space".²⁶ However, very soon the CSTO members failed what in Russia's eyes was a major test of solidarity. At a summit convened after the Russian – Georgian war, Moscow's allies, though condemning Georgia, did not agree to use the term "Georgian aggression" in the final declaration.²⁷ Despite Russia's pressure, especially on Belarus, no CSTO country sided with Moscow in recognising the Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence.

Russia's dissatisfaction with the CSTO increased over time, especially as Uzbekistan, the new member, proved a liability rather than an asset. The reform of 2010 did not change much for Russia, since its commitments in fact increased while those of its allies remained amorphous. In 2011, the Russian political elite began to ponder about a new reform of the CSTO. A group of experts close to the presidential administration suggested introducing majority voting for some of the CSTO's decisions and asking Uzbekistan either to comply or to leave.²⁸ Uzbekistan soon made its choice, but a shift to majority voting, an idea that was to meet fierce opposition even from the most loyal allies, was never seriously discussed. Russia's interest in the post-Soviet integration shifted to the EEU project. Moscow's Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 subtly acknowledged the CSTO's problematic performance, emphasising the importance of its "further transformation into a universal international organization" and the need of "strengthening the operative reaction mechanisms, the peacekeeping potential and the foreign policy coordination of the CSTO member states".²⁹

The decay of the alliance

The Ukrainian crisis and the "war of sanctions" between the West and Russia sent the CSTO into disarray. The Russian allies refused to recognise the Crimea as a Russian

²⁶Kontseptsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii [Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation] (15 July 2008), available: <<http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/785>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

²⁷Deklaratsiya moskovskoi sessii Soveta kolektivnoi bezopasnosti ODKB [Declaration of the Moscow Meeting of the CSTO Collective Security Council] (5 September 2008), available: <<http://kremlin.ru/supplement/204>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

²⁸*Kommersant* (Moscow) (6 September 2011).

²⁹Kontseptsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii [Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation] (30 November 2016), available: <http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6B6Z29/content/id/2542248> (accessed 1 May 2019).

territory and showed little sympathy, let alone solidarity, with Russia in its confrontation with the US and the EU. On the one hand, the rift between Russia and the West was an opening for the Russian allies as it allowed them to raise their international status acting as mediators or converting their refusal to side with Russia into benefits from the West. Belarus was especially adroit in pursuing these strategies, but other CSTO members acted in the same vein. On the other hand, and more fundamentally, Russia's assertiveness and readiness to go to the extremes in what was perceived as the defense of Russian national interests made its allies, even (or, rather, especially) the closest ones like Belarus and Kazakhstan, feel increasingly distrustful of Moscow's policies.

As tensions between Russia and the West showed no signs of abating, the Russian allies were less and less inclined to go on with the military integration under the CSTO banners. Belarus refused to host a second Russian military base, pointing out that what it needed was military aircraft for its national air force, not "warplanes from other states".³⁰ Kazakhstan was alarmed at Russia's launching of cruise missiles over the Caspian Sea to hit targets in Syria, with Moscow's response being "we will do it for as long as we feel it is necessary".³¹ Even Kyrgyzstan declared that the Russian base would have to leave the country after the relevant agreement expires.³² Unsurprisingly, Armenia turned out to be the only CSTO member to support Russia in Moscow's row with Turkey over the shooting of a Russian fighter jet.³³

The CSTO's flaws were revealed when the hostilities in Karabakh resumed in April 2016. Although the ceasefire was violated by Baku, Kazakhstan and Belarus displayed sympathy for Azerbaijan. Yerevan never expected much solidarity from these countries but their pointed refusal to take at least a neutral position was an unpleasant surprise. Belarusian ambassador was summoned to the Armenian Foreign Ministry in protest against what was seen as the violation of Minsk's obligations under the CSTO. Armenia heavily criticised the draft of the new Belarusian military doctrine that reiterated the ban on sending the country's troops abroad as "compromising" the CSTO.³⁴ The CSTO press secretary's statement blaming Baku for the ceasefire violation was hardly a consolation for Armenia.

The message Astana and Minsk intended to convey was of course for Russia rather than for Armenia. It told that Kazakhstan and Belarus would not allow dragging them into the escalating row between Russia and Turkey whom Moscow accused of "pouring oil" on the Karabakh flame.³⁵

³⁰Lukashenko: rechi o razmeshchenii rossijskoi aviabazy na territorii Belorussii ne velos' [Lukashenko: There Were No Discussions about Deploying a Russian Air Base in the Territory of Belarus] (6 October 2015), available: <<http://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-rechi-o-razmeshchenii-rossijskoj-aviabazy-na-territorii-belarusi-ne-velos-165419-2015/>> (accessed 1 May 2015).

³¹V. Putin, Meeting with President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov (23 November 2015), available: <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50767>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

³²Atambaev: rossijskaya baza "dolzhna uiti" iz Kirgizii, kogda istechet dogovor [Atambaev: Russian Base "Must Leave" Kyrgyzstan When the Treaty Expires] (1 December 2016), available: <<https://ria.ru/20161201/1482575128.html>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

³³Sargsyan: ODKB vystupila za formirovanie shirokoi antiterroristicheskoi koalitsii (Sargsyan: CSTO Supports a Broad Anti-Terror Coalition) (21 December 2015), available: <<https://tass.ru/politika/2546161>> (accessed 26 September 2019).

³⁴A. Sivitski, "Belarus's New Military Doctrine: What's the Message?" (1 September 2016), available: <<https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-new-military-doctrine-whats-the-message/>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

³⁵Medvedev: Turtsiya podlivaet maslo v ogon' karabakhskogo konflikta [Medvedev: Turkey Pours Oil on the Karabakh Conflict Flame] (9 April 2016), available: <<http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2741151>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

The controversies between Armenia, on the one hand, and Kazakhstan and Belarus, on the other hand, nearly paralysed the CSTO in 2015–2016. In 2015 the member states had agreed that the position of the Secretary-General should be rotated among them in the alphabetical order (previously, it had been understood that the CSTO highest official would be a Russian representative). Armenian representative was the first to take the helm. However, Kazakhstan blocked the appointment for 2016 and the first months of 2017. In October 2016 the CSTO summit in Yerevan was missed by President Nazarbaev, an unprecedented move on the part of the person who had preached the virtues of the Eurasian integration since the early 1990s. The next summit, convened in December 2016 in Moscow, was boycotted by Lukashenka who tried to extract Russian concessions over gas prices and imports of Belarusian dairy products.

Finally, Armenia's representative, General Yuri Khachaturov, assumed the CSTO Secretary-General office in May 2017. Next year public protests toppled the government in Yerevan. Nikol Pashinyan, the new Armenian leader, enraged Moscow with arresting Khachaturov in July 2018 on charges of overthrowing the constitutional order at the time of crackdown on the opposition protests in Yerevan in April 2008. The criminal charges against the CSTO's Secretary-General were a blow to the alliance's reputation and credibility, especially unpleasant to Russia as it took pains to press Khachaturov's nomination against Astana's and Minsk's recalcitrance.

Armenia recalled Khachaturov in November 2018 but insisted that its representative should assume the Secretary-General's office for the rest of Khachaturov's three-year term. This time Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan were united in their willingness to show the new Armenian leadership that it had overstepped the boundaries. Five out of six member states agreed to the appointment of Belarusian representative but Pashinyan mounted a fierce campaign to defend what he saw as Armenia's prerogative. While reiterating Armenia's loyalty to the CSTO, Pashinyan was quite outspoken in criticising the CSTO's inefficiency and the other members' failure to comply with their commitments to Armenia.³⁶

The CSTO entered 2019 with an Acting Secretary-General, a Russian national, and with no prospects of solving the appointment dispute. Acrimonious public exchanges over the issue between Yerevan and Minsk and Yerevan and Astana highlighted both the alliance's deep internal divisions and the lack of substance in the CSTO's performance.

However, the CSTO continues to function as a conduit of communicative action. Military drills and anti-drug exercises are held on a regular basis providing for the exchange of information and practice. The secretaries of the member states' national security councils as well as foreign ministers and defense ministers meet at least two times a year. The CSTO commission on military-economic cooperation discusses the standardisation of weapons and military equipment. Politically, the CSTO is used by smaller states as a means to extract concessions from Russia or at least to attract Moscow's attention to their concerns. When clashes between Kyrgyz and Tajik border guards erupted on the border between Tajikistan's Sughd province and Kyrgyzstan's Batken region in September 2019, Bishkek called for the CSTO's involvement and accused the alliance of inefficiency.³⁷

³⁶Pashinyan otritsaet, chto sammit ODKB perenesli po pros'be Erevana [Pashinyan Denies that the CSTO Summit Was Postponed on Yerevan's Request] (5 December 2018), available: <<https://ria.ru/20181205/1543504871.html>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

³⁷Konflikt na granitse. Politicheskie sily Kyrgyzstana prizyvayut ODKB vmeshat'sya [Conflict on the Border. Kyrgyz Political Forces Call on the CSTO to Interfere] (20 September 2019), available: <https://24.kg/obschestvo/130002_konflikt_nagranitse_politicheskie_sily_kyrgyzstana_prizyvayut_odkb_vmeshatsya/> (accessed 26 September 2019).

While the CSTO remained silent, Russia reacted, working behind the scenes to defuse tensions.

As the CSTO was visibly declining, so was the Russian interest in the alliance. Apparently, Moscow chose not to invest much effort in plugging the holes in the CSTO. Russia's efforts focused on building tactical alliances with major regional powers, in particular Iran and Turkey, and managing post-Soviet relations on bilateral bases. The Kremlin evidently decided that the CSTO has not lived up to its strategic expectations. Though the newest Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2016 pays lip service to the CSTO's importance, now it conspicuously avoids mentioning the concrete areas of its future development.³⁸ The renewed confrontation with the West and the cracks and holes it has revealed in the CSTO might have cemented the Russian leadership's conviction that Moscow has only "three allies: its army, navy and the military industry".³⁹

Eurasian Economic Union: great expectations and hard times

Emergence and normative framework

The EEU evolved out of a number of failed attempts at integrating the economies of post-Soviet countries. Starting from the early 1990s, Moscow's policy towards the economic integration with the "near abroad" had been ambiguous and hardly consistent. On the one hand, the liberal economists prevailing in the financial and economic ministries regarded Russia's own integration into the global economy as the highest priority. Aware of Russia's economic weakness, they looked skeptically at the benefits of investing resources into the economies of post-Soviet countries. On the other hand, the military and secret services were focused on retaining Russian influence in the near abroad, regarding it as imperative for maintaining Russia's own security and its global role. They saw economic integration as a means to attain strategic objectives.

In the chaos of Russian foreign policy of the early 1990s, the liberals' approach generally prevailed. The disintegration of the former Soviet Union's economic space proceeded spontaneously and with hardly any damage control. Whereas Moscow initiated signing dozens of CIS documents on multilateral economic coordination, the Russian government followed the trajectory of liberal economic reforms and vigorously pushed other countries from the ruble zone.

By the mid-1990s, the liberals' influence in the Yeltsin administration began to wane. They lost the first Duma election. The rapprochement with the West did not bring the results Moscow had hoped for, with the unrealistic expectations turning into accrued disappointment and irritation. Moreover, as the presidential election of 1996 neared, Yeltsin was anxious to curb the Communist Party's potential to exploit the electorate's nostalgia for the Soviet Union.

In the mid-1990s the discourse of integrating the post-Soviet space around Russia became entrenched as one of the core elements of Moscow's foreign policy statements. Russia's strategy in the CIS enacted by the presidential decree in 1995 approved the

³⁸Kontseptsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii [Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation] (30 November 2016), available: <http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248> (accessed 1 May 2019).

³⁹Rogozin nazval trekh soyuznikov Rossii [Rogozin Names Three Russian Allies] (23 February 2017), available: <<https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/4047324>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

model of integration “at different speeds” while retaining the overarching goal of integrating the entire CIS “economically and politically”.⁴⁰ Moscow’s efforts shifted from trying to breathe life into the CIS moribund structures to arranging narrower but presumably more cohesive and efficient integration frameworks.

Belarus and Kazakhstan were the two countries obviously most ready to set off on an integration journey with Russia. They had high levels of economic interdependence with the adjacent Russian regions, their living standards were close to Russia’s and their leaders were outspoken protagonists of Eurasian integration. In 1995 Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan signed an agreement on the customs union. In 1996, Kyrgyzstan joined, and a four-party treaty on deepening the integration in economic and humanitarian areas was signed. The latter’s objectives included the completion of the customs union by the end of 1996 and the coordination of structural, monetary and social policies.

In reality, these treaties remained expressions of general principles unsubstantiated with norms and rules. The customs union never materialised in the 1990s stalled by a myriad of practical problems and fundamental disagreements about the common market for oil and gas (that Belarus insisted on so that it could buy hydrocarbons at Russian internal prices) and free access to transit pipelines, one of Kazakhstan’s points of interest. After Yeltsin’s reelection, Russia’s attention to the customs union project slipped away, as the power struggle over the first president’s successor engulfed the Kremlin and the funds to pay for integration costs remained scarce. The financial crisis of 1998 highlighted that the customs union existed on paper only. As the ruble was devalued and Russian exports became cheaper, the customs union members did not hesitate to impose restrictions on Russian imports.

The Putin administration saw the economic integration of post-Soviet states through the lens of security, and Moscow turned sustained attention to this policy area. The growing economy, both in Russia and in most of post-Soviet states, brought about the expansion of trade and increased labour migration, creating incentives for the removal of obstacles to economic flows and making Moscow more inclined to foot the integration bills.

As with the CSTO, Russia tried to build on the foundation laid in the 1990s. In October 2000 members of the dysfunctional customs union established a new organisation, the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC). Its objectives were essentially those that the customs union had failed to achieve, but a new procedure of deciding by two thirds of votes was introduced in the Integration Committee, the main executive body. Russia had 40 votes, Belarus and Kazakhstan – 20 each, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – 10 each. The authority of the Integration Committee remained, however, very limited. All the issues dealing with the EurAsEC’s strategy and “aimed at the implementation of its goals and objectives” were delegated to the heads of states and the heads of governments who took decisions unanimously.⁴¹

The EurAsEC approved an ambitious development programme that foresaw the “completion” of the customs union, integrated energy market, free movement of capital,

⁴⁰Strategicheskii kurs Rossiiskoi Federatsii s gosudarstvami-uchastnikami Sodruzhestva Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv [Strategic Course of Russia with the Commonwealth of Independent States Members] (14 September 1995), available: <<http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/8307>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

⁴¹Dogovor ob uchrezhdenii Evraziiskogo ekonomicheskogo soobshchestva [Treaty on the Establishment of the Eurasian Economic Community] (10 October 2000), available: <<http://www.evrases.com/docs/view/3>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

unification of transport policies and even, in the more distant future, the introduction of the single currency.⁴² After Uzbekistan joined the Community in 2005 following the reorientation of its foreign policy to Moscow, the EurAsEC Secretariat seized on the idea of a water-energy consortium in Central Asia under the Community's auspices.

The EurAsEC's far-reaching plans stumbled upon economic and political blocks. Uzbekistan was unwilling to allow the EurAsEC's institutions any influence on its policies, thus nipping the idea of a "water-energy" consortium in the bud. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, low income economies with most of workforce employed in agriculture, did not need the tariffs on manufactured goods that Russia and Belarus were keen to maintain to protect their industries. On its part, Russia was reluctant to disburse funds necessary to make the customs union attractive for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

After Moscow's design of the Joint Economic Space with Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, a plan intended to tie Ukraine to the Russia-led customs union, had been frustrated by the Orange Revolution, Russia focused on consolidating the narrower economic grouping with Belarus and Kazakhstan. In August 2006 the EurAsEC summit decided that the Customs Union would materialise in two phases. First, it would encompass Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan and then the other countries would join the "core" once they are prepared. This decision marked a differentiation within the EurAsEC between the trio of the more economically advanced countries and the duo of "poor relatives" (Uzbekistan suspended its membership in 2008).

From 2007 to 2010, multiple agreements aimed at launching the customs union were signed by Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. In 2009, the supranational executive body, the Commission of the Customs Union, started operations. The Union's Customs Code came into effect in July 2010 and the customs controls on the borders between Russia and Belarus and Russia and Kazakhstan were lifted on 1 July 2011, a development hailed by Moscow as "the most important geopolitical and integration event ... after the breakup of the Soviet Union".⁴³

In December 2009, the presidents of the three countries signed a statement on moving to a higher stage of integration, the Common Economic Space (CES). It was to include a common market of goods, capital and labour, coordinated tax, monetary, fiscal and trade policies and unified energy, transport and IT networks. In 2012, the CES was inaugurated and the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC), its highest executive body, took over from the Commission of the Customs Union.

The CES had not yet come into existence when another chapter of integration began to unfold. As Putin's campaign for the third presidential term was launched in the fall of 2011, a series of far-reaching initiatives was unveiled. Among them was the deepening of integration within the customs union which was to be recast as "Eurasian Union", a project outlined in Putin's newspaper article published in October 2011. The Treaty on the EEU was signed in May 2014 and entered into force on 1 January 2015. The EurAsEC was terminated on this day. Armenia joined the EEU on 2 January with Kyrgyzstan following in August 2015.

⁴²Prioritetnye napravleniya razvitiya EvrAzES na 2003 – 2006 i posleduyushchie gody [Priorities of EurAsEC Development for 2003 – 2006 and Subsequent Years] (9 February 2004), available: <<http://www.evrazes.com/docs/view/30>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

⁴³V. Putin, "Stenogramma otcheta v Gosdume" [Report to the State Duma] (11 April 2012), available: <<https://rg.ru/2012/04/11/putin-duma.html>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

In many respects, the EEU's normative framework marks a departure from the previous attempts at post-Soviet economic integration. It is unusually coherent and thick, with the principles and the norms duly underpinned by elaborate rules and decision-making procedures. The cornerstone of the whole edifice is the liberal economic ideology. Indeed, the text of Putin's article on Eurasian integration might make a reader believe that it was written by a paragon of liberalism. Citizens were promised "a free choice about where to live, study or work", businesses – "all the advantages of a domestic producer" in the Union's countries and the member states – a "partnership" with the EU and the eventual integration into "Greater Europe united by shared values of freedom, democracy, and market laws".⁴⁴ A separate treaty signed in 2011 in view of Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization made the WTO norms part of the customs union's legal system.

The EEU's main objective is to ensure the free movement of goods, services, capital and labour and the functioning of the customs union. When the Union's normative framework was negotiated, the common understanding was that the EEU would focus on economy and become as depoliticised as possible. Kazakhstan was particularly intent on prioritising economy and blocked Russian suggestions to endow the EEU with competences in foreign policy coordination, border defense, visa policies, health care, education and culture.⁴⁵ On the Russian side, the chief negotiator was the Ministry of Economic Development, the bulwark of liberal economic thinking within the Russian bureaucracy.

The EEU's supranational component is stronger than that of the EurAsEC or of any other post-Soviet regional organisation. It has a supranational judiciary that the EEC, the member states and legal entities can appeal. Its decisions, in a significant departure from previous attempts to set up international courts in the post-Soviet space, are legally binding. The Court has become an important actor within the EEU institutional setting with an inclination for a broad interpretation of its competence.

Each country appoints three members of the EEC Board whose decisions are made by a two-thirds majority. It means that every country, including Russia, can be outvoted in the Board, an arrangement representing Moscow's unprecedented concession to Minsk and Astana who feared that the EEU might become an instrument of Russia's hegemony. The EEC's decisions are directly binding on the member states and legal entities. However, its autonomy vis-a-vis the governments is limited by the fact that "sensitive" decisions are the prerogative of the EEC Council consisting of deputy prime ministers and acting by consensus.

Performance and expectations

The normative framework of the customs union and the CES ("rebranded" as the EEU with little substantive change) was negotiated in 2009–2012, the years of a relatively benign international context marked with a "reset" of US – Russian relations. Spurred by high oil prices, Russian and Kazakh economies were growing, with spillovers for Belarus, a country closely linked to the Russian market. A quite different international

⁴⁴V. Putin, "Novyi integratsionnyi proekt dlya Evrazii" [A New Integration Project for Eurasia], *Izvestiya* (Moscow) (3 October 2011).

⁴⁵Kazakhstan Battles for More Independence in Eurasian Economic Treaty Union (27 May 2014), available: <https://en.tengrinews.kz/politics_sub/Kazakhstan-battles-for-more-independence-in-Eurasian-253769/> (accessed 1 May 2019).

setting and economic situation accompanied the transition from the CES to the EEU and the Union's first years of operation.

The crisis over Ukraine shook the foundations of the EEU. As Russia responded to the Western sanctions with the ban on agricultural imports from the EU and stopped free trade with Ukraine and Moldova, the other EEU members did not follow suit. Kazakhstan openly questioned Moscow's assertions that the EU – Ukraine Association Agreement was detrimental to the EEU countries' economic interests⁴⁶ and Belarus engaged in re-exports of “sanctioned” goods to Russia. In a clear departure from the EEU norms, Russia restricted Ukrainian transit to Kazakhstan. After the Russian – Turkish row over a downed jet poisoned the relations between Moscow and Ankara in late 2015 and Russia retaliated with economic sanctions, none of the EEU countries joined.

The drop in oil prices and the effects of Western sanctions sent the Russian economy into recession, with the GDP reducing by 3.7% in 2015 and by further 0.6% in 2016. Belarus was severely hit by Russian recession, losing 3.9% of GDP in 2015 and 2.6% in 2016 while Kazakhstan's annual economic growth slowed to 1% in 2015 and 2016.⁴⁷ All the EEU currencies were devalued.

The Russian foreign policy turn of 2014 and the change in its international standing undermined the EEU's fundamental principle of free trade. With Moscow's new “selective” implementation of the Union's basic principles, its normative framework became much more difficult to sustain. As tensions with the US and the EU began to mount, Russia moved to “securitize” the EEU, increasingly seeing it as a zone of political influence. Armenia was compelled to abandon its long-pursued objective of concluding the Association Agreement with the EU and to declare the intention to join the EEU. This U-turn, a result of the Russian – Armenian summit, came as a surprise to Belarus and Kazakhstan, the latter displaying much reluctance to endorse Armenia's membership.⁴⁸ Kyrgyzstan, unprepared for membership and deemed to be years from accession, was hastily recruited in the EEU in 2015.

Another challenge to the EEU came from Kazakhstan's admission to the WTO in late 2015. Kazakhstan agreed to lower its weighted mean customs tariff from 10.4% (established under the EEU) to 6.5%, reducing tariffs for more than 3000 categories of goods.⁴⁹ The EEU exempted these goods from its customs tariff and Astana pledged to restrict their circulation to Kazakhstan's internal market. Now Russia has to deploy “mobile customs groups” not only near the border with Belarus (to preclude the smuggling of agricultural products from the EU) but also to the Kazakh border (to curb the illegal imports of “exempt goods”).

Unsurprisingly, in 2014–2018 the EEU has seen a retrogression in terms of free movement of goods as compared to 2011–2013. Unable to use tariffs and quotas against each

⁴⁶Nazarbaev ne protiv assotsiatsii Ukrainy s ES [Nazarbaev is not Against the EU – Ukraine Association] (26 August 2014), available: <<https://ukranews.com/news/267199-nazarbaev-ne-protyv-assocyyacyy-ukrayny-s-es>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

⁴⁷Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook (2019), available: <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

⁴⁸A. Tokaeva, “Dve tsitaty Nazarbaeva vyzvaki dolgie spory v Armenii” [Two Nazarbaev's Quotations Caused Long Discussions in Armenia] (5 November 2014), available: <<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/armenia-eaes-karabakh-nursultan-nazarbayev/26673820.html>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

⁴⁹V. Surганov, “V ramkakh VTO Kazahstan otkazhetsya ot l'got” [Kazakhstan Will Refuse from Preferences within the WTO Framework] (3 July 2015), available: <<https://kapital.kz/economic/41712/v-ramkah-vto-kazahstan-otkazhetsya-ot-lgot.html>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

other, the EEU countries resort to wide-scale exploitation of sanitary and veterinary controls to advance their political and economic interests. Though Russia's meat and milk "wars" with Belarus have gained particular notoriety, with Minsk even opening a criminal investigation against the head of the Russian agency for consumer protection, Kazakhstan and Belarus often act in the same vein. The long-promised establishment of a joint body of sanitary and veterinary control remains a distant and unclear future. The single market for oil and gas is planned for 2025, and the decisions on how it would function are yet to be made.

The EEU has demonstrated some progress in the trade in services. 43 sectors of services were liberalised in January 2015 and 9 sectors including advertising, tourism and research, were approved for liberalisation in May 2018. The liberalisation of financial services has been delayed to 2025. Education has become one of the contested areas, as Russia tried to expand integration to this area claiming that it is a service inherently linked to the common market of labour while Kazakhstan staunchly objected to the idea and Belarus showed little enthusiasm.⁵⁰

The EEU has made a contribution to facilitating the movement of labour. The time within which labour migrants must be registered at the new place of residence was extended and the number of necessary papers reduced. The uniform rules of access to health care and pre-school education were introduced, and the agreement on labour migrants' pension rights is under consideration. It is essential for migrants that the EEU has inherited a visa-free regime from the EurAsEC and the member states cannot arbitrarily introduce visas in relations with each other.

Hard economic times and currency depreciations largely account for the EEU's disappointing progress in mutual trade in 2015 and 2016. After years of rapidly increasing mutual trade (it grew by 29% in 2010, 34% in 2011 and 9% in 2012), the trade turnover among the CES countries fell by 4% in 2013, by 11.6% in 2014 and by 25.4% in 2015. In 2016 it further reduced by 5.8%. In 2017, as oil prices stabilised and the EEU currencies regained some of the losses, the mutual trade began to rebound. However, the EEU's trade with external partners suffered heavier losses, and the share of the intra-EEU trade in the total turnover, while remaining relatively low for an integrated economic grouping, increased from 12.3% in 2014 to 13.5% in 2015 and further to 14.4% in 2016 and 14.6% in 2017.⁵¹ In 2018, the growing commodity prices accounted for a faster increase in the EEU's trade with external partners, and the share of the intra-EEU trade in the total turnover dropped to 13.5%.

Unsurprisingly, the EEU members are largely disappointed with its progress. *Armenia* has no common borders with other EEU states and joined the Union under Moscow's pressure. The EU and Russia account for a quarter of Armenian trade turnover each, and its trade with Kazakhstan and Belarus is miniscule. Yerevan had hardly any expectations of membership in terms of economic benefits and joined the EEU to enact the role of Russia's loyal ally and to avoid snubbing Moscow at the time of escalating

⁵⁰S. Yun, "Perspektivy integratsii v sfere obrazovaniya v ESES k 2025 g", [Prospects of EEU Integration in the Area of Education], in I. Ivanov (ed.), *Perspektivy razvitiya proekta EAES k 2025 godu. Rabochaya tetrad'* [Prospects of EEU Project Development by 2025. Working Paper] (Moscow: NP RSMD, 2017).

⁵¹Eurasian Economic Commission, *Vzaimnaya torgovlya tovarami. Statistika Evraziiskogo ekonomicheskogo soyuza. 2017 god. Statisticheskii sbornik* [Mutual Trade in Goods. Statistics of the Eurasian Economic Union. 2017. Statistical Almanac] (Moscow: Sam Poligrafist, 2018), pp. 14, 19.

geostrategic tensions. Armenian officials and experts are rather frank in explaining that the EEU accession was necessary to avoid the worst rather than to bring about improvements, hinting that Russia would probably have raised gas prices if Yerevan had not joined.⁵² Still, the first years of the EEU membership have been a disappointment for Yerevan, with investment from Russia and revenues from tourism plunging. In April 2016 Kazakhstan, intent to show solidarity with Azerbaijan after the Karabakh flare-up, insisted on moving a meeting of the EEU prime ministers from Yerevan to Moscow which Armenia denounced as “detrimental to the EEU’s reputation”.⁵³ No wonder that Armenia’s public support for the EEU is the lowest among member states⁵⁴ and the *Bright Armenia* party advocating the country’s withdrawal from the EEU entered the National Assembly with 6% of votes as a result of December 2018 election. Russia’s lifting of gas prices for Armenia since 2019, seen in Yerevan as Moscow’s attempt to put political pressure on Pashinyan’s government,⁵⁵ as well as Putin’s unprecedented refusal (with “lack of time” excuse) to meet the Armenian Prime Minister when the latter visited Moscow in January 2019 to inaugurate the year of Armenia’s presidency in the EEU,⁵⁶ would hardly make the EEU more popular with the Armenians.

Belarus, with half of its foreign trade tied to Russia, had quite clear expectations of the EEU. It wanted lower prices on Russian oil and gas and free access to Russian market for its agricultural products and machinery. These expectations repeatedly frustrated, Minsk has become the most openly dissatisfied EEU member, the only one to threaten withdrawal from the Union. To this Russia did not hesitate to respond that Belarus, were it to do so, would have to pay much more for oil and gas. At the end of 2018 the relations between Moscow and Minsk reached a remarkably low point, with Russia refusing to compensate Belarus for higher oil prices and claiming that it had “lost trust” in its ally⁵⁷ and Lukashenka accusing Moscow of using oil and gas as instruments of “blackmail” and intimidation aimed at “destroying” the Belarusian statehood.⁵⁸

Kazakhstan’s expectations included gaining protection from Chinese imports and developing non-commodity exports, benefiting from a single electricity market, and getting access to Russian pipelines. Astana also hoped for building bridges between the EEU and the EU. The support of the EEU project marked Astana’s decision to avoid being dragged into the “gravitational field” of Chinese economy and to develop its own industry and technology.

Kazakhstan’s expectations have also mostly been thwarted. The increase in non-commodity exports to the EEU market has been quite modest, hindered by numerous Russian

⁵²B. Tunyan, “Armeniya – EAES: dva goda chlenstva” [Armenia and the EEU: Two Years of Membership] (7 July 2017), available: <<https://jam-news.net/armenia-eaeu-two-years-of-membership/?lang=ru>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

⁵³Erevan obvinil Astanu v sryve sammita EAES [Yerevan Accuses Astana of Scuttling the EEU Summit] (9 April 2016), available: <<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/27663641.html>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

⁵⁴E. Vinokurov, “Eurasian Economic Union: Current State and Preliminary Results”, *Russian Journal of Economics*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2017), p. 68.

⁵⁵J. Kucera, “Russia Raises Gas Prices for Armenia in the New Year” (3 January 2019), available: <<https://eurasianet.org/russia-raises-gas-prices-for-armenia-in-the-new-year>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

⁵⁶A. Ivanov, “Pashinyan priekhal k Putinu ne vovremya” [Pashinyan Came to Putin at the Wrong Time] (25 January 2019), available: <<https://news.ru/v-mire/pashnyan-vizit-moskva/>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

⁵⁷Siluanov zavavil, chto Belarus’ poteryala doverie soyuznika v Rossii [Siluanov Said Belarus Had Lost Russian Trust as Ally] (25 December 2018), available: <<https://belsat.eu/ru/news/siluanov-zavavil-chto-belarus-poteryala-doverie-soyuznika-v-rossii/>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

⁵⁸M. Sharipzhan, “Lukashenka Says Belarus Will Never be Part of Russia” (14 December 2018), available: <<https://www.rferl.org/a/lukashenka-says-belarus-will-never-be-part-of-russia/29656460.html>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

administrative barriers. The EEU electricity market has been repeatedly delayed and the access to Russian pipelines remains a matter of indefinite future. The Ukrainian crisis clouded the prospects of the EU and the EEU entering into a dialogue on economic cooperation in “wider Europe”. Seeing the EEU’s performance as largely disappointing, the Kazakh elite has come to a consensus that no integration in other areas (such as social policy or visas and migration) is possible within the EEU unless its initial objectives are reached.

Kyrgyzstan joined the chorus of dissatisfaction. Bishkek had hoped that joining the EEU would open Russian and Kazakh markets to its agricultural products and bring the Russian money for the construction of hydropower plants, an investment Moscow had been promising for years. In reality, Astana erected barriers complicating both the sales of Kyrgyz meat in Kazakhstan and its transit to Russia.⁵⁹ In late 2015, Moscow told Kyrgyzstan that it had no resources to fund the \$3 billion worth hydropower projects,⁶⁰ though some smaller financial rewards from Russia followed in 2016 and 2017.

The EEU’s economic significance is limited for *Russia* whose trade with the Union’s members accounts for less than 10% of its total foreign trade turnover. Moscow expects that the EEU would help to link the economies of the participating countries to Russia so closely that their long-term political loyalty could be guaranteed. The EEU is the economic means to consolidate Russia’s position as a great power and to demarcate its zone of privileged interests from those of the EU and China. So far, the progress along this way remains limited and reversible, with Kazakhstan and Belarus putting much effort into keeping their space for policy manoeuvring as wide as possible and Armenia and Kyrgyzstan demonstrating growing dissatisfaction with the EEU’s performance.

Conclusions

More than a decade of the CSTO’s performance shows that it can be categorised as a dead-letter regime, with the member states hardly expecting its norms and rules to be followed. The CSTO is largely redundant for its participants in terms of their strategic objectives. However, it is relevant as an arena for member states’ enactment of their roles as Russia’s allies. As such, it is a conduit of communicative action, and leaving the CSTO or reducing the level of engagement with the alliance would be unthinkable for any of the participants as it would mean snubbing Moscow and undermining bilateral relations with Russia.

The EEU is a more complicated case. In its current form, it is only in the fifth year of existence which is of course too little to achieve its ambitious goals. It is not a single international regime but a framework overarching four different regimes (for goods, services, labour and capital). As our analysis has shown, the EEU provides some tangible benefits for citizens and businesses. At the same time, it gets closer to becoming an assemblage of largely dead-letter regimes as the mismatch between the member states’ expectations and the reality grows, its normative framework is diluted and its activities are politicised.

More often than not, the EEU fails as an instrument of strategic action. However, the Union, through its transnational bureaucracy and the dense networks of

⁵⁹T. Toktonaliev, “Tensions Build between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan” (26 October 2017), available: <<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tensions-build-between-kyrgyzstan-and>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

⁶⁰B. Pannier, “Kyrgyzstan Revokes Hydropower Deal with Russia” (20 January 2016), available: <<https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-kyrgyzstan-energy-dreams/27499926.html>> (accessed 1 May 2019).

intergovernmental interactions it spins, has become a major conduit of communicative action in the post-Soviet space. At the very least, it allows the member states to come to shared understandings of economic realities and of the obstacles on the ways to further cooperation. It has codified a shared set of economic and legal definitions that serve as a frame of reference for national bureaucracies and judiciaries. It makes the member states maintain permanent dialogues in multilateral settings and increases the density of communications between countries that would otherwise be less interested in dealing with each other (Kazakhstan and Belarus coordinating their positions with regard to Russian policies is an example).

So far, Russia remains persistent in trying to bring forward the EEU project. However, it is increasingly inclined to use “sticks” rather than “carrots” in relations with its partners, a development which decreases the likelihood of the EEU’s collapse but makes the deepening of integration more problematic. As Russian foreign policy tends to become riskier and more adversarial to the US and the EU, the international regimes Russia has built in Eurasia are less likely to progress to their objectives. At the same time, they are likely to retain importance for Russia’s neighbours as means of communication with Moscow, allowing for a better access to information about Russia’s intentions and reducing the level of mutual misperceptions.

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