



GR:EEN Working Paper

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Going regional the Russian way: The Eurasian Economic Union between instrumentalism and global social appropriateness

Introduction

In his *A Russian idea* (1946), the philosopher Alexander Berdyaev divided Russia's history in five major epochs: "There is Kiev Russia, Russia during the Tatar invasion, Moscow Russia, Russia of Peter the Great, Soviet Russia. It is possible that there will be some other new Russia. Russia's historical development has been catastrophic"¹. Expanding Berdyaev's periodization, the current stage of Russia's history might be defined 'Eurasian Russia', at least to the extent that the country's current foreign policy seems to be actually underpinned – if not utterly driven – by the willingness to embrace an epochal trend orienting its development. This sort of 'manifest destiny' hinges on the East/West divide that has constantly characterized the country's identity – as well as the political agenda of its leaders, These powerful opposing pulls have often resulting in an ambition for a distinct 'Russian way', more or less consistently combined with the Eurasian perspective, bestowing on Russia the role of bridging between the Western European and Eastern cultures.²

¹ Николай А. Бердяев, *Русская идея. О России и русской философской культуре: философы русского постоктябрьского зарубежья* Nikolay A. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea: On Russia, Russian philosophical culture: philosophers of Russian post-October immigration*, Moscow, 1990, Chapter I

² See more: Marlèn Laruelle, *L'ideologie eurasiste russe, ou comment penser l'empire*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1999; Всеволод Н. Иванов, *Культурно-исторические основы российской государственности*, Vsevolod N. Ivanov, *Cultural and historical bases of Russia's Statehood*, Kharbin, 1926; Петр Савицкий, *Россия - особый географический мир*, Pyotr Savitsky, *Russia, a special geographical world*, Praga, 1927; , Николай А. Бердяев, *Русская идея. О России и русской философской культуре: философы русского постоктябрьского зарубежья*

In today's Russia, the Eurasian agenda is not only the present-day manifestation of a firmly established feature of its national culture, but can also be regarded as part of a more or less consistent project meant to fill the ideological emptiness generated by the fall of the Soviet Union. The Eurasianist perspective has been advanced by the Russian political (Pryamakov, Kozyrev) and intellectual (Gumilev, Dugin) élites since the early 1990s, when for the first time the Eurasian idea was taken into serious consideration by the Russian leadership as an identity feature – and, as such, a political project – capable of uniting Russia's multicultural population in the absence of the USSR's communist ideology. This programme gave rise to a number of regional integration attempts pursued through organizations of little or no actual practical use (Commonwealth of Independent States³, The Collective Security Treaty Organization⁴), which proved ultimately unattractive for most former Soviet states⁵. This substantial failure of this first attempt led Russia to calibrate its integration strategy and switch from the CIS's comprehensive, multilateral format to one directed at a closer circle of loyal partners – the Eurasian Economic Union – where decisions are taken mostly on a bilateral base. Despite its marked intergovernmental nature, the EEU was outfitted with a number of supranational bodies modeled on the EU institutional setting, like Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, Eurasian Intergovernmental Economic Council Eurasian Economic Commission, and the Court of the Eurasian Economic Community. The institution-building effort did not change the political conditions underlying it; Russian officials end up predominating in the new bodies as well, making their existence purely nominal with all the major decisions been taken only at the presidential-level meetings⁶.

Despite these blatant imbalances, though, until the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine the EEU project seemed to produce a win-win situation for its members, one in which Russia's pre-eminence was perceived a reasonable price for the access it guaranteed to the 'junior partners' in terms of access to political and material resources – much unlike today, with all the peripheral members growing weary of their ties to the drowning Russian economy⁷. His obsession⁸ with Ukraine – a country perceived as absolutely necessary to the EEU due to its dense population and economic potential – led Putin to make a number of political moves that generated confusion and were perceived as intimidations among the other current and prospective members of the Eurasian institutional network, laying waste on his own integration project. Over the last few months, many experts have predicted a fast end of the Eurasian project as its formal enlargement undermined its

Nikolay A. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea: On Russia, Russian philosophical culture: philosophers of Russian post-October immigration*, Moscow, 1990.

³ Commonwealth of Independent States official site: <http://www.cisstat.com/eng/cis.htm>

⁴ The Collective Security Treaty Organization official site: <http://www.odkb-csto.org/>

⁵ More on previous attempts and issues of Post-Soviet integration see: Alexander Libman, "Russian Federalism and Post-Soviet Integration: Divergence of Development Paths" *MPRA Working Paper* No. 12944, 2009; Jan Fidrmuc, and Jarko Fidrmuc, "Disintegration and Trade" in *Review of International Economics*, 11, 2003, pp. 811-826

⁶ Ivona Wisnewska, "Eurasian Integration. Russia's attempt at the economic unification of the Post-Soviet area" in *OSW Studies*, number 44, Warsaw, July 2013, pp. 23-27.

⁷ Rilka Dragneva, Katarzyna Wolczuk Russia, "The Eurasian Customs Union and the EU: Cooperation, Stagnation or Rivalry", *Briefing paper*, Chatham House, August 2012, http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/0812bp_dragnevawolczuk.pdf

⁸ Nicu Popescu, "Eurasian Union: the real, the imaginary and the likely" in *Chaillot Papers* N 132 – September 2014, EU Institute for Security Studies, www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/CP_132.pdf

internal integrity⁹. Yet, despite a conduct that has often appeared reckless and contradictory, Russia's resolve does not seem to be dwindling, not even in front of the economic and diplomatic costs of the enterprise or the dissent spreading among the members, which are already using Russia's current international isolation to get major concessions in exchange for their participation in the project. What the paper shows is that Russia's occasionally unreasonable commitment to its integration agenda can be accounted for as an attempt to keep up to its aspiration as a regional power in the eyes of its local and global partners and to prevent the loss of the crown jewel – Ukraine – of its 'sphere of influence' – with all the material and symbolic repercussion that would come from it. The hypothesis investigated here is that is that the ultimate source of the inconsistencies permeating Russia's strategy is exactly the contradiction between, on the one hand, the notion of 'sphere of influence' that, under many forms, appears to permeate it, and on the other the character of current regional integration, proving to be less susceptible than expected to become a mere instrument of Russia's policies.

1. Russian rationales of regional integration

1.1. *A brief history of regional integration in the post-Soviet space*

The significance of the EEU can be better understood through a broad overview of previous integration projects carried out in the same area. The first initiative after the fall of the Soviet Union was the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), in December 1991, which initially had been intended as an instrument to smooth the transition started with the USSR disintegration ; only at a later time attempts were made to transform it into the institutional component of the integration process of the post-Soviet space.. In 1993, Russia proposed a full-blown Economic Union¹⁰, loosely modeled on the EU, but the project never took off, due to the lack of a sustained political will by Russia to engage in the multilateral effort the latter required. Russian Federation itself failed to ratify a number of CIS economic integration agreements.¹¹ Already in this early phase, the inherent conflict between Moscow's ambitions as a leader of regional integration and the unwillingness to bear the burden that comes with the role surfaced. As a matter of fact, most of the institutions created to ensure the partners' compliance with the obligations undertaken eventually proved to be bare of any real power – emblematic is the in-built ineffectiveness of the CIS Economic Court¹². Thus, the failure of this first attempt was due not only to skeptical members like Georgia and Azerbaijan, that increasingly lost interest in the project, but also to Russia's attempt to avoid the fulfillment of any binding economic obligations, and the exclusion of CIS from its foreign policy priorities. As far as economic cooperation was concerned, Russia preferred to deal on a bilateral basis, capitalizing on its superior bargaining power. By the

⁹ Nate Schenkkan, "Eurasian Disunion. Why the union might not survive 2015" in *Foreign Affairs*, 24 December 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/armenia/2014-12-26/eurasian-disunion>

¹⁰ Rilka Dragneva, Kataryna Wolczuk Russia, "The Eurasian Customs Union and the EU: Cooperation, Stagnation or Rivalry", op. cit.

¹¹ The Agreement on the Principles of Customs Policy of 13 March 1992, the Agreement on the Free Trade Area of 15 April 1994 and the Protocol Amending the Agreement on the Free Trade Area of 2 April 1999

¹² Gennady M. Danilenko, "The Economic Court of the Commonwealth of Independent States" in *International Law and Politics*, Volume 31, p. 893, http://www.pict-pecti.org/publications/PICT_articles/JILP/Danilenko.pdf

mid-1990s, Russia's focus shifted towards smaller, sub-regional groupings (The Union State of Belarus and Russia, Eurasian Custom Union, Eurasian Economic Union), whose participants were considered more loyal by Moscow. The second significant experiment was the creation, in 1995, of the Eurasian Custom Union¹³, set up to include Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In October 2000, in the first year of Putin's presidency, the Custom Union was transformed into the Eurasian Economic Community. Although some progress was made in terms of institutional effectiveness, the main drawbacks of the previous integration projects remained. Significantly, all the Community's measures and agreements were to be given formal consent by national parliaments; the latter, though, would inevitably tend to postpone ratification or simply fail to provide it – , with each country ratifying only convenient political decisions, without respecting the guidelines of the organization and Russia proving the most inflexible custodian of national primacy over supranational authority. The next regional commitment would come with the Treaty setting up the Eurasian Union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, signed on October 7th, 2007.

These organizations aim (at least formally) at advancing economic cooperation, but are not the only ones created within the post-soviet space. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), for instance, was established in 1992 as an intergovernmental military alliance of six members (Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, withdrew in 2012). The activity of the organization is mainly focused on the Central Asia region, containing drugs, terrorism, arms trafficking. After the Arab spring and with the rise of the Islamic State, local leaders showed great interest in the CSTO integration and Russian military protection, fearing that the regime-change wave would stretch to their countries too. At the moment the CSTO is trying to take over NATO's role in Central Asia's security system, also as a consequence of the latter's declining presence in Afghanistan, and is the instrument through which Moscow tries to influence its neighbors' defense policies. The CSTO tried on several occasions to gain recognition by NATO as an equivalent regional alliance, but these efforts had no success, and NATO continued to engage in bilateral relations with the single states rather than the organization as a whole¹⁴. Another organization for regional cooperation is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization¹⁵, created in 1996 with the intent of enhancing mutual trust at the borders, where Russia and China are competing for leadership. The organization is one of the areas where the ambivalent relations between Russia and China play out, with the former having a hard time in competing with China's attractiveness as an economic partner and as a leader of cooperation process. Despite the lowering growth rate compared with last years' impressive performance, China is still engaged in ambitious projects like the creation of the Great Silk Road¹⁶ economic beltway proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013 during his speech titled "Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future" at Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University, which implies that China looks at Central Asia within a much

¹³ Rilka Dragneva, Kataryna Wolczuk, "Russia, the Eurasian Customs Union and the EU: Cooperation, Stagnation or Rivalry", op. cit.

¹⁴ Richard Weitz, "The Collective Security Treaty Organization: Past Struggles and Future Prospects" in *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 152, 21 July 2014, www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/RAD-152.pdf

¹⁵ Shanghai Cooperation Organization official site: <http://www.secsco.org/EN123/>

¹⁶ Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries, 2013/09/07 http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml

broader framework than Russian Federation, envisaging the joint advancement of 21 states stretching from East Asia to Europe.¹⁷ Now that Russia is experiencing a hard economic crisis, the chances that China will become even more attractive for the Central Asian countries as a Eurasian pole's locomotive increase. Nevertheless, as Russia is increasingly losing its credit in the eyes of the West and is risking becoming an international outcast, it is striving to convey the message to its western partners and to its own population has about the valid alternatives offered by Asia. In this context the Russia-China competition in Central Asia has become secondary, while their strategic economic and political cooperation is being demonstratively made a priority. Russia expressed its complete support to China's integration project and confirmed its participation in it by signing as much as 32 bilateral agreements at the eve of the military parade in the Russian capital in May 2015, thus *de facto* agreeing to a secondary role in this megaproject. Moreover, the existing economic ties between Central Asia and China are already much stronger than those with Russia. In 2011 the trade flows between China and the combined five Central Asian states exceeded \$39 billion, while that with Russia is only \$16,6 billion¹⁸. While Russia was trying to impose its political influence on the region, China focused – quite successfully – on enhancing mutual economic ties and cooperation. As a result, the EU and China are bigger trading partners of every post-Soviet country – except Belarus and Uzbekistan – than Russia itself. The Eurasian Union is expected to change the existing trade context, at least to some extent. At the same time enhancing trade with its EEU partners does not seem to be directly profitable for Russia either, which still levies much higher tariff levels than most post-Soviet states, protecting internal market more than its regional partners do: Russia's trade-weighted average tariff agreed in the WTO was 9.9% in 2011, whereas in the same year it was 3.6% for Armenia, 3.8% for Kyrgyzstan, 2.7% for Ukraine, and 3.7% for Moldova.¹⁹ Trade flows between Russia and its EEU partners have not showed any increase in the last two years – in fact, the trend has fared negatively. Russian and EEU officials argue that the perspectives of the Union are more important than immediate results. The Head of the Eurasian Economic Commission Vladimir Khristenko in an interview to Gazeta.ru claimed that creating a favorable environment for business and trade is worth the financial burden on Russia's budget²⁰. Ultimately, Russia does not seem to consider this project in economic terms, as much as a measure aimed at boosting the international standing of the country – as well as Putin's domestic political support.

1.2. *Eurasianism as a philosophical movement*

The Eurasian idea did not appear on the political agenda out of the blue. The discussion on Russia's civilization choice began in the middle of the XIX century out of the classic opposition between '*zapadniki*' (westernizers) and '*slavyanofily*' (slavophiles). The most prominent Russian

¹⁷ Maria Gurova, *The Great Silk Road. From Sea to Sea*, 28 January 2015, http://russiancouncil.ru/en/inner/?id_4=5163#top

¹⁸ UNCTAD

¹⁹ Nicu Popescu, "Eurasian Union: the real, the imaginary and the likely", *Chaillot Papers* N 132, September 2014, EU Institute for Security Studies, http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/CP_132.pdf

²⁰ Рустем Фаляхов, *От Евразии одни убытки*, Rustem Falyahov, *Eurasia brings only losses*, 21 October 2014, <http://www.gazeta.ru/business/2014/10/17/6264305.shtml>

writers and philosophers argued about Russia's historical mission and the road it is destined to undertake. Fyodor Dostoevsky can be regarded as one of the first slavophiles and 'pre-urasianists', advocating for Russia's historic mission to bring about a higher level of civilization to Asia, as he noted in his diary in 1881:

“In Europe we are parasites and slaves, but to Asia we shall come as masters. In Europe we are only Tatars, but in Asia we shall appear as Europeans. Russia is not only Europe, but also Asia. Perhaps, even more of our hopes lie in Asia than in Europe...In our future destiny Asia will perhaps be our principal solution”²¹.

Many of the slavophiles' ideas, expressed by Dostoevsky and others like Soloviev, Danilevskii, Aksakov, were incorporated in Eurasianism, which stemmed from the ideas of Russian émigrés circles, thriving from the 1920s on in Prague, Berlin and in Paris, and led by outstanding personalities such as Prince Nikolai S. Trubetskoi (1895-1968), linguist and ethnographer, and Petr N. Savitskii (1895-1968), geographer and economist²². Unlike Asianism, that implied Russia's civilizing mission, and was embraced by Russian slavophiles in the XIX century, Eurasianism never stressed Russia's cultural or historical affinity with Asia over Europe nor Russia's 'civilizational duty' toward Asia. Instead, Eurasianism saw Russia as an integral part of a specific region – Eurasia – demarcated by a particular geographical position and cross-cultural identity.. Remarkably, the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway (1891-190), which indirectly triggered the Russo-Japanese war (1904-1906), was started in response to the growing threat posed by East Asia in the eyes of Russia, and as part of the latter's project to consolidate its Far Eastern territory²³. Interestingly enough, the TSR's technological backwardness is also considered one of the reasons the Russian Empire lost the war, since this was a single-track railway that could not satisfy the needs of Russian troops in the Far East²⁴. The humiliating defeat at the hand of what was still perceived as a small Asian country – hardly a member of the international society *stricto sensu* – in a war that had been meant to be short and painless and chiefly aimed to distract public opinion from internal problems, was among the main grounds of the First Russian Revolution of 1905. The war marked the ideological defeat of slavophile's theory, putting into question Russia's supremacy over the Asian countries²⁵. Instead, pan-Mongolism and the Asian political tradition of totalitarian rule gained a positive connotation. Later on, the stabilization of the Bolshevik regime in Russia would result in the development of the theoretical structure of these orientalisng ideas in the émigré circles abroad. Later on, the stabilization of the Bolshevik regime in Russia – and the emigration it caused – would result in the development of the theoretical structure of these orientalisng ideas²⁶.

²¹ Федор. М. Достоевский, *Дневник писателя*, Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Writer's diary* 1881, Moscow, Nauka, 1995.

²² Marlène Laruelle, “The Orient in the Russian Thought at the Turn of the Century” in, *Russia between East and West: Scholars debate between East and West*, (edited by) Dmitry Shlapentokh, Brill Academic Pub, 2006, p.31.

²³ Paradorn Rangsimaporn, *Russia as an aspiring power in South-East Asia. Perceptions and Policies from Putin to Yeltsin*, Oxford, St. Anthony's Series, 2009, pp.42-58.

²⁴ Anthony Lambert, *The epic history of the Trans-Siberian Railway*

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sponsored/travel/great-rail-journeys/9617634/train-moscow-vladivostok-russia.html>

²⁵Paradorn Rangsimaporn, *Russia as an aspiring power in South-East Asia. Perceptions and Policies from Putin to Yeltsin*, op. cit., pp.42-58.

²⁶ Marlène Laruelle, “The Orient in the Russian Thought at the Turn of the Century” op.cit., pp. 30-31.

Eurasianism hinged on the idea and the ostensible evidence of a “dying West” and a “rising East” Among its most prominent advocates there were: the linguist Nicolas S. Trubetskoy, the historian Georgy Vernadsky, the geographer Petr N. Savitsky, the theologian Georgy V. Florovsky, the musicologist Pyotr P. Suvchinsky, and – most often forgotten – the legal scholar Nicolai N. Alekseev²⁷. In his works Trubetskoy, questioned Russia’s belonging either to Europe or to Asia not only in cultur or geographical terms, but also anthropologically, as Russia’s “non-European, half Asiatic face” clearly bespoke. He also assumed that after the Revolution of 1917, the new state formation could acclaim the legacy of the Russian, since Russians had stopped being a dominant nation, becoming “one people among the others”²⁸. Another prominent scholars of Eurasianism, G.V. Vernadsky²⁹, also rehabilitated the Mongol invasion, arguing that it had a decisive role in creation of the Russian statehood. According to Vernadsky, the collision of the Byzantium Empire and the turkic-mongolian cultural heritages generated the core of Russian culture, which in essence amounts to a “Christianization of turkishness”³⁰. He also predicted Russia’s turn to the East, elaborating a theory of space and time in Siberia, in which he argues that different historical times were simultaneously present in the Russian space, providing it with unique properties, specific to a genuine ‘universe’: the father one sees, the more one goes up in time, so that 1000 *verstes* distance was equivalent to 100 years back. Moreover, according to Vernadsky, Russo-Siberian experience becomes a reference for the rest of the Universe³¹. P. Savitsky, on the other hand, played up significantly the cultural component over the political one, prevailing in other works. He proposed two models of Empires: a continental one, forged by political relations that conveyed the model of Russian Empire, and maritime and economic one, based on the British model. According to Savitsky, only the first model could be considered healthy, able to create a supranational culture and contribute to the progress of humanity³². The major thread running through the works of all its proponents was that Russians should not only have nothing to do with the West but also with Slavdom. Russians are regarded as a mixture of Slavic and Turkic blood and, as an ethnicity/civilization in its own right, is inextricably bound to other people - the minorities of Russia/USSR³³ – living within the border of a common political community.

Émigré intellectuals interpreted the Revolution of 1917 as the point where Russia left the European world for good. Accordingly, they were critical of Marx’s reductionist view of history as class struggle, emphasizing instead questions concerning society and the formation of the state³⁴. Under several aspects, the Eurasianist programme is ideologically close to the USSR mission to blur boundaries between peoples in the name of their common progress towards a higher level of civilization, but it is the accent on spiritual, metaphysical and religious identity that made their ideas

²⁷ Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *Aesthetics and Politics of Space in Russia and Japan: A comparative philosophical study*, Plymouth, Lexington Books, 2009, p.131..

²⁸ Nikolay S. Trubetskoy, “The Upper and Lower Stories of Russian Culture” in *The Legacy of Ghengis Khan and other Essays on Russia’s Identity* (edited by) Anatoly Liberman, Michigan Slavic Publication, 1991., pp. 81-99

²⁹ Георгий В. Вернадский, *Опыт Евразии с половины VI века до настоящего времени*, Georgy V. Vernadsky, *The History of Eurasian experience since VI century until nowadays*, Berlin, 1934.

³⁰ Idem.

³¹ Marlène Laruelle, “The Orient in the Russian Thought at the Turn of the Century” op.cit, pp. 32

³² Петр Н. Савицкий, *Поворот к Востоку*, Petr N. Savitsky, *Turn to the East*, Sofia, 1996.

³³ Nikolay S. Trubetskoy, “The Upper and Lower Stories of Russian Culture”, op.cit.

³⁴ Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *Aesthetics and Politics of Space in Russia and Japan. A comparative philosophical study*, op. cit, p.131.

unacceptable for the Soviet ideology, beside being elaborated by the ‘white émigré’, considered traitors of the motherland. USSR special services knew about their existence and spied or investigated on their activity. One of the most interesting evidences is an 11-volume fabricated case – the No P-28879 – dated 1934 entitled “Russian national Party”, made up by NKVD.³⁵ In the climate of Stalin’s purges of 1930’s, a number of intellectuals not affiliated to the communist party were accused of being in contact with the self-exiled Eurasianists and conducting joint anti-Soviet activities. Though the case was fabricated, the investigation revealed some real connections with N.S. Trubetskoy and diffusion, albeit limited, among the intelligentsia of his major work “Problems of Russian self-consciousness”. Some of these intellectuals were executed in 1938-1939, to be then rehabilitated in 1964³⁶. The Eurasian thought, however, was not significantly widespread before the 1990s, when, with the fall of the Soviet Union and the communist ideology, the spiritual ties (*duhovnye skrepy*) between the peoples inside of the Russian Federation and its neighbors was left bereft of their ideological and institutional underpinning. It was then that the neo-Eurasianist movement arose, with Lev Gimilev and Alexander Dugin as its main ideologists.

Nowadays, the Eurasianist aspirations have shifted from envisaging Russia’s mission to bridge the gap between East and West to fulfilling its historical role as ‘Greater Russia’³⁷ – a concept defined mainly by western scholars. While the Eurasianists of the 1920’s denied the concept of Russia as a nation due to its complicated and mixed origin, Neo-Eurasianism sees the Russian nation as the prime mover of the integration process. A striking example of this new attitude is provided by Alexander Dugin, who introduces a militaristic notion of patriotism in his *Fourth Political Theory*³⁸. Ethnic Russians are seen as the backbone of Russia/Eurasia, providing benign geopolitical guidance for a wide variety of people. Russians are, as Dugin put it, ‘Eurasian Romans’, an all-embracing group that includes anyone who accept its geostrategic guidance³⁹. He predicts a clash between the Eurasianists and Atlantists, setting Russian traditional values against western pragmatism and spiritual emptiness. He assumes that, if necessary, Russia should protect its national interests and values by all means, the military included. The emphasis here is put not on the country’s remote and complex historic and cultural origin as much as on Russia as a nation state, backed by an institutional setting that creates the concrete conditions for the many ethnic/cultural groups included in the Russian national make-up to channel their trans-historical virtues into their country’s political life. The imperial mission of the intrinsically diverse Russian society⁴⁰ is warranted by the historical process of its geographical expansion, and is not about the peaceful coexistence of local values, but rather hinges on cosmic idea(l)s to be pursued and activated by opposing western individualism with the pre-eminence of the national interest. Accordingly, Russia is first and foremost a *state* and a *nation*, but one based on a broader idea of (its own) civilization. This means that national values and virtues are far more than the result of specific

³⁵ Central Archives of Federal Security Service of Russian Federation, case *Российская национальная партия, Russian National Party*, NP-28879, 11 volumes.

³⁶ Федор Д. Ашнин, Владимир М. Алпатов, “Евразийство в зеркале ОГПУ-НКВД-КГБ» // *Вестник Евразии*, Fyodor D. Ashnin, Vladimir M. Alpatov, “Eurasianism in the eyes of Soviet Secret Services” in *Vestnik Evrazii*. 1996. №2, <http://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/evraziystvo-v-zerkale-ogpu-nkvd-kgb>

³⁷ Bertil Nygren, *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin’s Foreign Policy Towards the CIS Countries*, Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series, 2007.

³⁸ Alexander Dugin, *The Fourth Political Theory*, London, Arktos, , 2012.

³⁹ Marlène Laruelle, “The Orient in the Russian Thought at the Turn of the Century”, op.cit., p. 14.

⁴⁰ Idem.

historical conditions, but are, in a sense, eternal virtues, whose promotion and diffusion Russia sees as its destiny and mission, at least in the countries it considers to be part of its sphere of influence.

The foreign policy agenda of nep-Eurasianism depicts the Russian geopolitical space as a “cosmos” that takes smaller “solar systems” under its wing to create a loose federation of allied nations and states⁴¹. Nevertheless, the opinion that Eurasianism, at least in its classic sense, represents a source of Russia’s current foreign policy is not shared by everyone. Marlène Laruelle argues that the idea of “great power” (*derzhava*), dominant in today’s Russia, is not strictly synonymous with Eurasianism. Russia wants to play an important part in resolving international crises, for example in the Middle East, or supporting Serbia and Iran on certain issues, and this activism is not in tune with the Eurasian paradigm⁴². It implies that Russia is a strong and united country projecting its successful and long-lasting political model on smaller states situated in its sphere of influence. The ‘special right’ to impose its political will on smaller neighbouring states derives from the corresponding ‘special duties’ Russia as a great power has in upholding international society – even at the cost of curbing other actors’ rights.

1.3. *Eurasianism as a political tool*

Since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis, Eurasianism has taken a very dynamic turn, becoming a quite effective (rhetorical) criterion of Russia’s foreign policy-making. The Eurasianism ideas, mixed in a more or less consistent fashion with the idea of “*Russkiy Mir*”(Russian World^[1])⁴³ – implying the reunification of all Slavic peoples based on their cultural and spiritual ties – are meant to provide an ideological background – an extremely *pragmatic* one indeed – to Russia’s ambitions to re-establish its own sphere of influence in the region. That the latter’s borders roughly coincide with the Soviet Union’s only bears out the hypothesis that the long-established discourses re-activated by the Putin’s administrations are at best another set of instruments to be bent and adjusted according to the circumstances.

Despite its inconsistencies, the idea of Eurasianism has come by a genuine popularity in recent years, thank to its active promotion which was declared as the main mission of mass media by the President of the Eurasian Academy of Radio and Television Valery Ruzin⁴⁴ and its presence in intellectuals’ debate and research, which has guaranteed its continuous evolution and attested its historical/scientific soundness in the eyes of the larger public. As said, Vladimir Putin seems to

⁴¹ Mathew Raphael Johnson, *Russian Nationalism and Eurasianism: The Ideology of Russian Regional Power and the Rejection of Western Values*, <http://www.4pt.su/en/content/russian-nationalism-and-eurasianism-ideology-russian-regional-power-and-rejection-western>

⁴² Marlène Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism An Ideology of Empire*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, p.8.

⁴³ The concept of Russian World defines a transnational and transcontinental community united by spiritual and cultural ties to Russian culture and language. It is believed to be first formulated by General Mikhail Cherniaiev, military governor of Turkistan region in 1871, who established an ultra-slavophil newspaper *Russkii Mir*. This concept acquires not only historic-philosophical, but also political connotation and is often used by Russian leadership in regards to Russian-speaking minorities abroad and a common origin of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, as constituent parts of Russian World. Russia becomes a center of a broader civilization community, which goes far beyond the borders of one country.

⁴⁴ Eurasian Academy of Radio and Television was founded in 2001 in order to promote integration of media community of Eurasian countries by means of joint projects and conferences, the main one is an annual Eurasian Teleforum.

have been using the discourse of Russia's Eurasian identity as a justification of its (geo)political ambitions in the area – only loosely defined on scholarly accounts – applying an entirely instrumental approach. Rather than a genuine, historically and theoretically congruous alternative to the last decades' paradigms of Russia's national identity, Eurasianism is put to use as a piecemeal rationale of Russia's dominance in the region, at last befitting its unique liminal identity and the responsibilities – and power – deriving from it. It is interesting noting how skillfully Putin modifies this complex – and inherently ambiguous – discourse on Russia's identity, adapting it to the audience addressed. When dialoging with his European colleagues, he only emphasizes the European character and ancestry of Russian culture: during his Munich speech, Putin underlined that with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the people of Russia made a historical choice – “a choice in favour of democracy, freedom, openness and a sincere partnership with all the members of the big European family”⁴⁵, implying that Russia is part of this “big family”. On the other hand, the dialogue with his Asian partners presents Russia as a country belonging in both Europe and Asia as a pre-eminently Eurasian country (SCO meetings⁴⁶, bilateral Russia-China meetings), emphasizing common interests and challenges to face. This Janus-faced behaviour is not to be regarded exclusively as a slick *modus operandi*, but is also the ultimate result of a progressive – although hardly linear – shift of Russia towards Asia, one that became ever more evident since the middle 1990's, when the disillusion with the West was at its highest. Russian élites [2]grew disappointed with Western leaders treating Russia as a ‘minor-league’ European country and being reluctant to help Russia in its post-crisis development. At that time, Russian government contained a number of staunch eurasianism and asianism advocates, such as Y.Pryamakov⁴⁷ and A.Kozyrev⁴⁸. In 1994, foreign minister Kozyrev stated that Russia is “destined to be a great power”. His argument was that, despite present economic and social upheavals, due to its sheer geographical size, historical greatness, and the retention of a sizeable nuclear arsenal, Russia would remain a major force in world affairs, no matter who the other big power were⁴⁹. As Russia is about to make her choice, continued Kozyrev, it is of crucial importance for her to realize that the world needs the nation not as the “weakling” of Europe and Asia, but as a strong partner, a dignified member of the family of democratic legitimate states. A policy that meets these aspirations would be the best contribution the West could make to Russia's stability, and the most effective obstacle to any revival of “Russian imperialism.”⁵⁰ In fact, lack of consideration by its western partners brought Russians to a disillusionment with the West and, in part, to its gradual isolation and the rise of nationalism. The more the West isolates Russia, says Yurgens, the more its “internal disease” worsens and the population supports this self-isolation⁵¹. The effects of this process manifest themselves today not

⁴⁵ Vladimir Putin, Speech at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy 02 October 2007,

<http://wakeupfromyourslumber.com/full-text-putins-speech-munich/>

⁴⁶ This year Shanghai Cooperation organization summit will be held in Russia, in the capital of Republic of Bashkortostan, Ufa. The majority of Republic's population is muslim.

⁴⁷ Russian Foreign Affairs Minister 1996-1998.

⁴⁸ First Russian Foreign Affairs Minister 1990-1996

⁴⁹ Andrey Kozyrev, “A Strategy of Partnership” in *Russian Foreign Policy in Transition : Concepts and Realities*, (edited by) Andrei Melville and Tatiana Shackleina, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2005, pp.193-20

⁵⁰ Idem.

⁵¹ Igor Yurgens, *The West vs. Russia: The Unintended Consequences of Targeted Sanctions*, October 8, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-west-vs-russia-the-unintended-consequences-targeted-11427>

only based on specific geopolitical circumstances, but also due to a presence of a strong leader that inspires security and a long awaited-for leadership in domestic and international affairs..

2. The internal Debate

The Eurasian theory is far from being universally shared in Russia or in any other EEU member states. In Russia there exist two threats to the Eurasian integration project: on the one hand, there is the pro-European liberal intelligentsia, which sees this process as an unwarranted attempt to re-impose Russia's hegemony in the region. On the other hand there are the quantitatively more significant Russian "patriots", whose increasing number can be regarded as a result of the revival of Russian nationalism, fueled by the government's propaganda. Their composition is extremely mixed and controversial, including local war veterans, bikers, kazaks – famous for their military preparation – and orthodox activists. The "Russian civilization" project – in its conceptually ambiguous, but practically complementary relation with the Eurasian one – has therefore to fight its ideological war on the external and the internal front at the same time. In order to maintain a large public support also during the crisis, the Russian government has to raise the degree of nationalistic exaltation, mobilizing people against any dissent – labeled as liberal intelligentsia, fifth columns, betrayers of the motherland – and emphasizing the uniqueness of the Russian nation. This nationalistic turn is definitely not welcomed by the neighboring countries, which fear the absolute dominance of Russia within this integration process, and receive mixed information about their powerful neighbor's real intentions. Despite the inescapable conceptual tension existing between the two ideas, the imperialistic ambition as a vision able to finally re-unite the population has also been making the idea of Russia-driven Eurasianism highly popular as recent polls show that 70% of Russians are favorable to the Eurasian integration project. Similar orientations can be found in Kazakhstan, where 85% of population supports this process.

At the same time the EEU enlargement may cause some serious problems inside Russia, ready as it is to be the core and the primary moving force of the Union but not to treat its partners as equals. This problem is bound to become more evident with the accession of new members as Kirgizstan, which joined on 9th of May 2015, and eventually Tajikistan. These countries' GDP consist mostly of remittances of immigrants that work mainly in Russia. Most Russians have a negative attitude towards these immigrants, who often speak very little Russian or are illegal workers. This attitude is fueled by the recent revival of Russian nationalism and chauvinism, fuelled by the Ukraine crisis. In recent years, the Russian government has been toughening immigration laws and regulations, imposing strict rules and fees on the issuing of work permits. This policy is plainly at odds with the provisions of the EEU Treaty, according to which the Union membership automatically establishes the free movement of goods, services and labour. Inconsistent as this orientation may seem, Russians support both the integration process and the restriction on immigration rules. Led by emotions rather than logic considerations, the prime concern of large parts of Russian society now is to restore Russia's greatness and international status, as a third of the population express the wish that the EEU became a sort of 'updated' USSR consisting of independent members.

The Eurasia idea has been always popular among the élites, but it was only with Putin's presidency that it came to be a quasi-official ideology, no matter how heterogeneous and inconsistent. In 2012, when Putin was reelected president for the third time, his foreign and domestic policies took a very traditional and authoritative slant, heavily informed by realpolitik. The opposition's protests of 2011 took place within a political context marked by the liberalization promoted by Medvedev's presidency. In the following years, the reaction to this emerging trend was an increasingly strict control over opposition and media, restraints on foreign investments and growing dependence on commodities exports, ending up in zero (productive) economic growth. All this, combined with the annexation of Crimea as well as the consequences of the geopolitical adventure in Ukraine and the diving oil prices, brought Russia's economy to its knees. This state of affairs put seriously at risk the Eurasian Economic project, since the direct investment of Russia on the enterprise was estimated to be \$5,2 billions in financial aids and loans to the other members. Besides, it becomes ever more obvious⁵² that it is more the lack of alternatives that leads the new members to join the Union rather than a genuine political desire for cooperation. All the members are committing to multi-vector foreign policies: Belarus asked International Monetary Fund for new loans⁵³, Kyrgyzstan lives on re-export of cheap Chinese goods to Russia, Kazakhstan is enhancing its ties both with the EU and China⁵⁴.

The multiple options of Eastern Europe and Central Asia countries, however, are limited by the highly adverse opinion the West, besides diplomatic rhetoric, has of the Eurasian Economic Union. A particularly harsh censure came from Hillary Clinton, who accused Putin of seeking to revive the Soviet Union by pursuing the project of a regional economic union dominated by Russia. It is interesting to note that Putin has never denied his ambitions – which still secure him a large support by the public opinion in Russia. Nevertheless, until recently he had not seen the European Union as an opposing bloc to the Eurasian one; on the contrary, he emphasised that the latter was inspired and looked up to the European Union as a model, also implying that the EEU could one day become part of a larger European integration process. Putin expressed his point in an article in *Izvestiya* in 2011: “Soon the Customs Union, and later the Eurasian Union, will join the dialogue with the EU. As a result, apart from generating direct economic benefits, accession to the Eurasian Union will also help countries integrate into Europe sooner and from a stronger position”.⁵⁵ He also referred to a possible cooperation between the two regional structures: “In addition, a economically consistent and balanced partnership between the Eurasian Union and the European Union that is will prompt changes in the geo-political and geo-economic setup of the continent as a whole, giving rise to global effect”. This discourse is a part of the “Greater Europe”⁵⁶ idea, from Lisbon to

⁵² Kyrgyzstan and Armenia.

⁵³ Belarus is unlikely to receive new loans from IMF before the 2015 presidential elections and introduction of democratic reforms and liberalization of prices (<http://belsat.eu/en/articles/imf-not-give-loan-2015-presidential-elections-experts/>).

⁵⁴ Nursultan Nazarbaev, “The Next Chapter in Kazakhstan-EU Relations” in *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 October 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-next-chapter-in-kazakhstan-eu-relations-1412703767>. See also “Kazakhstan, China: Close Neighbours that Build Mutually Beneficial Ties” in *Astana Times*, 5 May 2014, <http://www.astanatimes.com/2015/05/kazakhstan-china-close-neighbours-that-build-mutually-beneficial-ties/>

⁵⁵ Vladimir Putin “A new integration project for Eurasia: The future in the making” in *Izvestia*, 3 October 2011, <http://www.russianmission.eu/en/news/article-prime-minister-vladimir-putin-new-integration-project-eurasia-future-making-izvestia-3->

⁵⁶ Marek Menkiszak, “Greater Europe: Putin's Vision of European (Dis)integration” in *OSW Studies*, Warsaw, October 2013.

Vladivostok, aimed at reconciling the European and the Eurasian integration processes. This concept echoes the *Common European Home* or *Greater Europe*, sponsored by Gorbachev and Yeltsin. In Russia's vision, Greater Europe would consist of two integration blocs – the Western bloc of the European Union, with Germany in the driving seat, and the Eastern bloc, consisting of the emerging Eurasian Union, with Russia in a hegemonic position⁵⁷. The message was that Europe could interact with the CIS states, but only as long as Russia was acknowledged its role as pivotal mediator. However, this project has never been taken in a serious consideration by the EU and its realization seems now more improbable than ever. Some experts consider Russia's push on the Eurasian integration a response to the EU Eastern Partnership project as they are roughly targeted at the same group of countries⁵⁸. What Russia considers its “near abroad” is EU's “shared abroad” and the more the West's involvement in this region grew, starting with the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, the more Russia's promotion of the Eurasian integration became aggressive.

In spite of all the uncertainties and the potential risks of Russia's domineering leadership, the Ukraine crises made it clear that, when the push comes to shove, Western Europe is not ready to provide military protection to its Eastern prospective partners, nor to accept the specific socio-economic domestic arrangements national leaderships are rooted in. This crucial aspects – actively reinforced by Moscow's behavior – ultimately play into the hands of the much less demanding Eurasian integration, which offers financial aids and loans as well as eventual military protection free of any conditional request for democratization or structural reforms. It is probable that other countries, run out of alternatives would consider joining the EEU.

3. The other ‘Eurasians’

Russia has always conceived of the concept of a “Great Power” in terms of territorial grandeur and political weight rather than economic capability. That the Economic Economic Union is also forced into this scheme – despite its formal *economic* focus – is confirmed by the issue stirred up by Armenia and Kyrgyzstan's accession to the organization. Arguably, Russia yearned so much the prospective gains in terms of international prestige that would come from an enlarged membership – enhancing so its sphere of influence and proving the importance and sustainability of the Eurasian project – that it blatantly ignored the opposition of Belarus and Kazakhstan.. The original fellow members of the Eurasian Economic Union – as it would become even more clear during the Ukrainian crisis – did not support Russia in its competition/confrontation with the West, and made clear that they do not see themselves as mere ‘satellites’ inside the Russian civilization, but rather as independent players on an eminently *political* scene. Nevertheless, the serious doubts raised about the economic and political soundness of letting in two countries that would provide an insignificant – or even negative – m contribution to the EEU were dismissed by Russia at the altar of its aspiration to regional leadership and global standing

From a practical point of view, though, the Eurasian project is only viable with a complete support from Belarus and Kazakhstan although it was clear from the beginning that it would be

⁵⁷ Idem.

⁵⁸ David Cadier, “Eurasian Economic Union and Eastern Partnership: the End of the EU-Russia Entreeux”, London School of Economics, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR019/SR019-Cadier.pdf>

Russia to carry most of the financial burden. What their reaction to recent developments in Ukraine revealed, though, was the pragmatic nature of these two countries' almost constant loyalty to Russia, which turned out to be ultimately conditional on the pursuit of their own national interest. The economic crisis that Russia is facing as a consequence of its geopolitical adventure in Ukraine due to the sanctions lifted by the West has prompted Belarus and Kazakhstan to search for new partners and adopt multi-vector – if not utterly independent – foreign policies. This is deeply at variance with the original design of Eurasian project – at least the way Russia sees it – which rests on the implicit assumption that it will be up to Russia only to decide on the common foreign policy, while the other partners will be solely in charge of local policies. Significantly, as soon as Russia started to be affected by the Western retaliation, Belarus and Kazakhstan tried to re-define their place on the international scene, presenting themselves as alternative interlocutors, or peacemakers (Minsk agreements, project for negotiations in Astana in January 2015)⁵⁹. Russia, on the other hand, had to reluctantly accept its junior partners' mediating role now that its relations with the West are at their lowest since the end of Cold War. At the same time, Western powers – albeit not particularly happy with the two countries' authoritarian regimes – have grasped the opportunity meetings on a neutral territory as a viable diplomatic way out of the Ukrainian crisis. While the results produced by Nazarvbaev's and Lukashenko's peacemaking efforts remain arguable, the message of the two leaders is pretty clear: they are broadening their foreign policy prospective and emancipate, to a certain extent, from Russia, whose economic gravitational pull is growing weaker as an effect of a crisis, which promises to be longer and more painful than that of 2008-2009. In today's conditions, Russia is bound to run into stark difficulties in covering the costs of this expensive integration project.

In general, the Ukrainian crisis marked a watershed in EEU members' mutual relations, exacerbating differences in their respective visions. Minsk and Astana have not recognized and both are eager to exhibit their newfound neutrality in matters concerning Russia and Ukraine. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev conceives of himself as “an honest manager, who supports neither side”⁶⁰ while Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko claimed on December 21, during a meeting with his Ukrainian counterpart Petro Poroshenko, that Belarus was prepared to do anything Poroshenko would ask “within a day.” Additionally, Lukashenko has essentially re-established custom checkpoints on the Russian border, defying the very purpose of the customs union⁶¹.

3.1. Belarus: Friend or Foe?

Of all the post-Soviet states, Belarus should fit most effortlessly into the Eurasian geopolitical design, since the country is the most economically dependent on Russia – a dependency that is heightened by its political isolation, owing to its patently autocratic regime. In this context the newly acquired role of mediator in the peace talks on the Ukraine crisis offered Lukashenko an unequalled opportunity to breach – at least in part – long-lasting substantial absence of foreign

⁵⁹ *Минск и Астана мирят Москву и Киев, Minsk and Astana are trying to conciliate Moscow and Kiev*, editorial 23 December 2014, <http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2014/12/23/missiya-i-komissiya>

⁶⁰ Alexey Malashenko, “Belarus and Kazakhstan: Ukraine Is Not Our Enemy” in *Eurasia Outlook*, Carnegie Moscow Center 26 December 2014, <http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=57604>

⁶¹ *Idem*.

policy options other than the undisputed siding with the overawing neighbour⁶². [3]. Though Lukashenko did not take a direct part in the 16-hours long negotiations, he benefitted of these talks more than anyone else. He seized an important opportunity to transform his status from “last European Dictator” into main European peacemaker, with European leaders paying thankful visits to him. All this would be impossible in other circumstances, but in this case Belarus’s strategically neutral position made it the best venue to discuss a peace plan to try and stop the bloodshed in Ukraine.

Belarus is the only country that has not ruled out – at least in principle – a closer political union within the Eurasian Union, as envisioned already by the Union State of Belarus and Russia launched in 1999⁶³. Political loyalty was used by Belarus as a bargaining chip to obtain additional aids and concessions from Russia. Usually Belarus supports Russia in such fora as UN and OSCE especially when democracy and human rights are concerned⁶⁴ and underpins its role as a great power by participating in all its integration projects initiated by Russia on the post-Soviet space. Belarus knows very well what Russia’s weak spots are and is now proving able to leverage on its political ambitions. On the other hand, in its bilateral relations with Belarus Russia follows the principle according to which “a bad peace is better than a good quarrel”⁶⁵, turning a deaf ear on Lukashenko’s criticism against Russia’s policy in Ukraine⁶⁶. Besides, Lukashenko was among the first to recognize the new Ukrainian government and attended the inauguration of Poroshenko, claiming to be ready to help Ukraine on “first request”⁶⁷. All these circumstances have granted Belarus a comparatively privileged position and give the country a greater liberty of action in exchange for its habitual allegiance to Moscow – allowing for instance the country to not join Russia’s embargo on European and American goods, but to benefit from re-exporting banned European goods to Russia.

The Machiavellian motivations of Lukashenko can be seen in his lack of support to Ukraine’s accession to the Eurasian Economic Union:⁶⁸if Ukraine were to join the Russia-led integration projects, Belarus would have to compete for Russia’s benevolence and would lose part of its relative importance. However, there is a set of reasons that assure Lukashenko of Putin being receptive of his wishes: first, soon after it became obvious that Ukraine would not join the EEU it has become imperative for Russia to make sure that Belarus would stay on board. Second, Russia needs Belarus acting as the second pillar of *Russkij Mir* (Russian World), in order to depict Russia as the gravity centre of all the ethnic Russians, Russian-speaking and Slavic people in general.

⁶² Belarus hosted both Minsk summits on Ukraine conflict

⁶³ The Union State of Belarus and Russia is a supranational formation launched by a treaty of December 8th 1999, envisioned as a federation with deep economic and political cooperation within it.

⁶⁴ Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga, “Support as a means of subordination: Russia’s Policy on Belarus”, in *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, May 2013.

⁶⁵ Arkady Moshes, “Russian-Belarusian Relations after Vilnius. Old Wine in New Bottles”?, *Eurasia Policy Memo*, No 304, PONARS, December 2013, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/russian-belarusian-relations-after-vilnius-old-wine-new-bottles>.

⁶⁶ Volha Charnysh, “The Real Winner in the Ukraine Crisis” in *The National Interest*, 28 April 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-real-winner-the-ukraine-crisis-10317>

⁶⁷ Лукашенко: Беларусь всегда поможет Украине, *Lukashenko: Belarus will always help Ukraine*, 21 December 2014, <http://korrespondent.net/ukraine/politics/3458947-lukashenko-belarus-vsehda-pomozhet-ukrayne>

⁶⁸ Arkady Moshes, “Russian-Belarusian Relations after Vilnius. Old Wine in New Bottles”?, op.cit.

3.2 Kazakhstan: Pioneer of Eurasian Integration

Even though the Eurasian Economic Union is largely regarded as the Russian President's pet project, it was President Nazarbaev who first officially proposed the idea at the Moscow State University in March 1994. He suggested that this integrationist scheme be based on the principles of *добровольность* (freewill) and *равноправие* (equal rights).

23 years ago, Kazakhstan was a Soviet Republic subservient to the Kremlin's industrial and resource agenda. Now a thriving regional power, the Central Asian republic aims to secure the country's modernization plan without being perceived as a Russian puppet.⁶⁹ Nazarbayev explicitly set the goal of positioning his country among the world 30 most developed economies⁷⁰. Regional integration, attraction of foreign investments and technologies and the promotion of a 'New Kazakh Patriotism' are the pillars of this developmental project, which necessarily requires a strong economic support from Russia, preferably via the EEU. Accordingly, Kazakhstan always emphasized the economic character of the Union, as well as the role of the organization in preventing episodes like last April's "trade wars" with Russia, when cheap Russian goods flooded Kazakh market due to economic recession and currency devaluation in Russia. The sudden competition suffered by local producers led to bans on a number of food and agricultural products from Russia.

The war in Ukraine and the West's sanctions on Russia hardened the position of those who already argued against Kazakhstan being part in an economic union with Russia. Besides, the Ukrainian precedent incited preoccupation in Kazakhstan for its territorial integrity, as 30% of its population are Russians, concentrated mainly in the North. This problem may become crucial once Nazarbayev will no longer lead the country and an eventual new leader may have different views on Kazakhstan's Eurasian future.

3.3. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan: an inevitable choice

Quite unexpectedly, Armenia became a member of the Eurasian Economic Union only one day after the latter had officially been launched on January 1st, 2015. The meaning of this step is definitely more political than economic, since the country has a GDP only amounting to non more than \$10 billion (i.e. less than one percent of the EEU's total) and adds just 3 million people to the common market (roughly equal to two percent of the EEU population).⁷¹ Moreover, Armenia has neither a common border with the EEU, nor direct communication lines, which will no doubt thwart their economic cooperation. Another obstacle on the way to Eurasian integration is the low-intensity conflict over Nagorny Karabakh, a region that self-proclaimed its independence from Azerbaijan and is *de facto* controlled by Erevan, but whose status is not acknowledged by the international

⁶⁹ Jakob Muratov, "A Cautiously Happy Kazakhstan: Eurasian Economic Union Implications" in *Eurasia Outlook*, 29 July 2014, <http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=56273>

⁷⁰ Address by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Leader of the Nation, N. Nazarbayev "Strategy Kazakhstan-2050": new political course of the established state", 14 December 2012, http://www.akorda.kz/en/page/page_poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazakhstan-lidera-natsii-nursultana-nazarbaeva-narodu-kazakhstana

⁷¹ Anton Barbashin, "The Eurasian Illusion: The Myth of Russian Economic Union" in *Foreign Affairs*, 15 January 2015, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142781/anton-barbashin/the-eurasian-illusion>

community. Disregarding the Union's regulations, Armenia was accepted with the exclusion of Nagorny Karabakh.

Nevertheless, Armenia's accession is intended to add credibility – albeit on an almost exclusively symbolic level – to the Eurasian integration project. Russia and Armenia have very strong historical and cultural ties, strengthened by common Orthodox faith of the majority of its population. The two countries' shared cultural and spiritual identity has always played an important role in their bilateral relations and now has gained a central role in Eurasian rhetoric, which implies the Eurasian peoples' common cultural background, resulting from mutual contamination and interaction throughout their historical development.

The other newly acquired member of EEU is Kyrgyzstan, whose choice to join seems to be a necessary – if not desperate - choice, especially in light of statement of Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambaev: "Ukraine can choose among the Association Agreement with EU and the Custom Union. We cannot."⁷² Kyrgyzstan is the second poorest country in the Former Soviet Union after Tajikistan and its southern borders are hardly controlled by national authorities and often serve as a transit point for drug and weapon trafficking. Both Belarus and Kazakhstan were not enthusiastic about Kyrgyzstan joining the Eurasian Union – Lukashenko even granted political asylum and citizenship to the overthrown Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiev, The two leaders have gone so far as to boycott meetings in their respective capitals⁷³. Kazakhstan for its part is afraid that Kyrgyzstan's entrance may expose the domestic textile manufacturing to foreign competitors, especially from lower labour cost Kirghizstan⁷⁴. On the other hand, the Eurasian Economic Union membership is supported by 70% of the population of Kyrgyzstan. This can be explained by the better labor migration opportunities in Russia that the common membership would provide. Already now the money the remittances of Kyrgyz migrants in Russia amount to 29% of country's GDP⁷⁵. An uncontrolled flow of people and goods from Kyrgyzstan could create potential problems for Russia, which has been recently hardening its migration policy. This did not prevent Russia and Kazakhstan from providing relief aid – \$300 million – to soften the negative impact of the transition period on Kyrgyzstan, as it will lose its profits from reselling cheap merchandise from China, which now constitutes one of the main sources of income for the country.⁷⁶

4. Ukraine at a crossroads

The relevance of the discourse about the Russian World became evident during the crisis in Ukraine, when the government's instrumental interpretation of it allowed the ideas of militaristic

⁷² Jack Farchy, "Russia's neighbours: Primary colours" in *Financial Times*, 9 June 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/ad076a54-efbc-11e3-bee7-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3bQ9JrrIZ>

⁷³ Arkady Moshes, "Russian-Belarusian Relations after Vilnius. Old Wine in New Bottles"?, op.cit.

⁷⁴ Giuseppe Cappelluti, "Russia Gains Ukraine and Armenia, but(maybe) will lose Kyrgyzstan" in *Eurasia*, 9 January 2014, <http://www.eurasia-rivista.org/russia-gains-ukraine-and-armenia-but-maybe-will-lose-kyrgyzstan/20661/>

⁷⁵ http://www.ratel.kz/raw/FT_ogranichennyiy_vyibor_sredney_azii

⁷⁶ Ryskeldi Satke, "Kyrgyzstan and the Eurasian Economic Union: The view from Bishkek", European Council on Foreign Relations, 9 May 2015, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_kyrgyzstan_and_the_eurasian_economic_union_the_view_from_bis3022

patriotism formulated by Dugin⁷⁷ to be applied to real life, and the confrontation over the country's entering the EU Association Agreement rather than the Eurasian Custom Union was framed in an ideology-laden terms, and presented as a war between Russia and the West. Then again, no matter how political expedient, both in the Eurasian theory and the Russian World's Ukraine was a crucial area. The country's symbolic value is amplified by its having been home to Kiev Rus'⁷⁸, a medieval East-Slavic State hold to be the ancestor of Slavs. Soviet and Russian historians have considered Kiev Rus' a cradle of all three East-Slavic peoples, of which Russia presents itself as the political patron, while Belarusians and Ukrainians are mere subgroups⁷⁹. The propaganda put in place to justify the intervention in Eastern Ukraine hinged more or less explicitly on this mythical/historical significance of the country.

This discourse is very popular with Russian leadership. In fact, in his speeches Putin went even farther, arguing that Russians and Ukrainians are actually one people⁸⁰. In his speech at the Foundation of Ukraine's Civilizational Choice conference, delivered on July 27th, 2013, President Putin affirmed that:

“Our ancestors who lived in these lands made this choice for our entire people. When I say for our entire people, we know today's reality of course, know that there are the Ukrainian people and the Belarusian people, and other peoples too, and we respect all the parts of this heritage, but at the same time, at the foundations of this heritage are the common spiritual values that make us a single people”⁸¹.

4.1. *The sacred land of Crimea*

The very day Crimea was annexed, on 19th March 2014, Putin cunningly mentioned in his speech the baptism of Prince Vladimir in 988 referring to Crimea – where the christening was officiated – as a sacred place for all Russian Orthodoxy, and therefore Russian people – all implicitly and un-problematically identified as Orthodox Christian. In the revisionist process of Russian history, the figure of Prince Vladimir has recently acquired major importance in Russia. The annexation of Crimea coincided with the 1025th anniversary of the Christianization of Kievan Rus', which occurred in 988 on the shores of Crimea. On this occasion it was decided to raise a 25-meters statue of Prince Vladimir's on Sparrow Hills in Moscow. The sacredness of this reacquired land coincided with the newly acquired common understanding of Russia's Orthodox Christian identity as a core of historical, cultural and spiritual development.

There is another important historical event, related to Crimea, which is not usually mentioned in official discourses, but might have an impact on Putin's vision of the situation. The Crimean war (1853-1856), officially started to protect Orthodox Christians, led to a humiliating defeat and triggered a number of deep structural reforms within the Russian Empire, and forced Alexander II to make some important concessions, like the abolition of serfdom. The symbolical

⁷⁷ Alexandr Dugin, *The Forth Political Theory*, op. cit.

⁷⁸ Serhii Plokhyy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations. Premodern identities in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, Cambridge University press, 2006.

⁷⁹ Idem, p. 1-2.

⁸⁰ Transcript of Vladimir Putin's speech at Orthodox-Slavic Values: The Foundation of Ukraine's Civilisational Choice conference, 27 July 2013, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/5783>

⁸¹ Idem.

and practical importance of Crimea for Russia is hard to overestimate. It hosts Russia's Black Sea Fleet, providing to Russia a warm port and an access to the Black Sea and important strategic defense asset. While it may lack modern vessels, the Black Sea Fleet remains capable of addressing naval threats and defend Russia's interests within in the region⁸². The annexation of Crimea came at the cost of the participation of Ukraine as a whole in the Eurasian project, which today remains bereft of the third 'natural' pillar of Russian World. Significantly, Putin concluded the mentioned speech at the Foundation of Ukraine's Civilisational Choice conference with the following words:

"Let me say again that we will respect whatever choice our Ukrainian partners, friends and brothers make. The question is only one of how we go about agreeing on working together under absolutely equal, transparent and clear conditions." ⁸³

It is worth mentioning that at the moment of this speech, it had already been agreed with the than president Yanukovich that Ukraine would not sign the Association Agreement, in exchange for lower gas prices and financial aids⁸⁴. The uprisings that followed these decisions and the later developments spoiled the 'Eurasian dream', leading Russia to a much more assertive pursuit of its foreign policy strategy.

Ukraine remains a geopolitical pivot both for Russia and the West. As Brzezinski notes, "its very existence as an independent country helps transform Russia. Russia without Ukraine can still strive for imperial status, but it would then become a predominantly Asian imperial state."²⁴ "Therefore," Brzezinski continues, "if Moscow regains control over Ukraine, with its 52 million people and major resources as well as its access to the Black Sea, Russia automatically regains the wherewithal to become a powerful imperial state, spanning Europe and Asia."⁸⁵

Conclusions: Is Russia's strategy really going to pay back?

The Eurasian Economic Union project is a crucial part of Russia's Great power ambitions, securing it the internal legitimacy and a certain weight on the international political scene as a regional leader, which seeks to be recognized internationally. Putin cares about being on West's international agenda and the recent wave of isolation, manifested in boycotting Russian military parade on 9 May and failing to invite Russia to the 70th anniversary of the Holocaust commemorations in Poland, generated great disappointment among the Russian leadership and the public opinion. The regional leadership, embodied in the EEU is meant to make Russia a first-rate player in today's multi-polarizing world.

⁸² Paul N. Schwartz, "Crimea's Strategic Value to Russia", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 18 March 2014, <http://csis.org/blog/crimeas-strategic-value-russia>

⁸³ Transcript of Vladimir Putin's speech at Orthodox-Slavic Values: The Foundation of Ukraine's Civilisational Choice conference, 27 July 2013, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/5783>

⁸⁴ In December 2013, several weeks after the uprisings broke out in Kiev, Putin and Yanukovich agreed in Moscow on \$15 billion aid package from Russia in form of purchasing Ukraine's Eurobonds as well as on a 30% gas discount until 2019.

⁸⁵ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy And Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, 1997, p.46.

At the base of the mixed results and the more or less instrumental ambiguities of Russia's foreign policy orientations there seem to be a deep conceptual contradiction that not even the unprincipled *decisionism* is capable to harness. Despite the media's emphatic parallel with the Cold War sparked by the conflict in Ukraine, Russia's international behavior recalls much more praxis-oriented XIX century foreign policy. Russia's decisions appear to reflect a conception of the international system where diplomatic affairs are to be mainly the responsibility of "Great Powers", while the destinies of smaller nations are contingent on the higher interests of major international players – interests that are conceived of as 'systemic', granting therefore Great Powers the right and the duty of acting on behalf of the international community as such. No matter how firmly granted this underlying notion actually is in theoretical and empirical terms – especially in light of recent 'realist' orientations in how international relations are handled – the international system Russia lives in retains the features of thick institutionalization and tight global interdependence that have characterized it since the end of World War II and especially over the last 25 years. Today's world may have become one in which old school power politics matter more than it would have seemed possible only few years ago, but this does not wipe out the extensive, highly sophisticated – and extremely resilient – net of institutional arrangements, shared beliefs and conventions that Russia has been part of over the last decades. Even when assertively pursuing its national interest only-oriented agenda, Russia inevitably ends up using rules and regulations of the international organization it is a member of – like its UN veto right in the deliberations over the Syrian conflict. On various occasions Putin underlined the importance to respect and follow the international law, but the hypocritical nature of such statements does not prove at all that these institutions are insignificant, since a certain level of duplicity has always been part and parcel of their functioning within social context of contemporary international politics. It is against this backdrop that some of Putin contradictions should be interpreted, like when in his Munich speech he stated that "it is necessary to make sure that international law have a universal character both in the conception and application of its norms⁸⁶", only to state at press-conference in December 2014 that "life is more complicated than the international law", implying that it cannot always be respected and that it only can be implied when Russia's national interests are not affected. Other than an idiosyncratic response to different environment, this conceptual conflict may be deeper in nature, and bound to the gap existing between Putin's assumption about its international surroundings – which in turn may well be constrained by his very capacity to think in accurate term of international phenomena – and the highly complex nature of today's global context. The same Janus-faced approach can also be seen in case of the Eurasian Union. On the one hand, the organization is but an instrument purposely devised to have no other function than enhancing the regional leadership of great power Russia and serving the other members' subordinate practical interest in having an institutional framework underlying their mainly bilateral relations with Russia and each other. All the members have their pragmatic reasons to join the Union, taking advantage of economic and military benefits that this integration brings without threatening their regimes or imposing democratic reforms. In this sense, it is even likely that the Union might become attractive for some other countries of the region, as the price Russia is ready to pay for its internal stability and international status seems to be higher than ever. On the other hand, though, the EEU was inevitably modeled, at least to a

⁸⁶ Vladimir Putin, Speech at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy 02 October 2007, <http://wakeupfromyourslumber.com/full-text-putins-speech-munich/>

certain degree, on the EU model. Although this aspect might be of little consequence in terms of the EEU's actual functioning, it reveals how inescapable social frameworks are in orienting, wittingly or not, the structure of the institutional means utilized even by self-assured Russia. What is more important, though, is that this unavoidable 'appropriateness pull' does impinge on the general effectiveness of Putin's foreign policy. Presenting the EEU as the Russian contribution to the worldwide phenomenon of regionalization does not come without concrete consequences in the expectations interlocutors are bound to have about an initiative like this. Distrustful and/or biased opinion about Russia may well let foreign governments look at EEU as a mere political instrument devised by Putin, but this does not imply that they are going to play along with it: on the contrary such an intemperate lack of compliance with the otherwise effective and well defined format 'regional organization' makes all the more difficult to 'sell' the re-establishment of a XIX century-like sphere of influence labeling it with the name of one of the kinds of international organizations that many old and emerging powers are putting much effort and expectation into.