
***THE PROJECT OF EURASIAN UNION: THE POSITIONS OF RUSSIA,
BELARUS, KAZAKHSTAN AND ARMENIA***

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Abstract: This article uses Russian and European sources in order to analyse how the Eurasian Customs Union is built as a regional project, which competes with the EU in the ex-Soviet space. Belarus and Kazakhstan promote their own positions. Russia prioritized the enlargement of the Eurasian Customs Union in 2013-2014, employing soft and hard power instruments. Armenia's decision to join the Eurasian Customs Union instead of signing its Association Agreement with the EU was a Russia's success at that moment, but the geopolitical battle has continued over Ukraine, Republic of Moldova and Georgia. This is also a battle between political systems. The EU needs a clear smart power strategy and instruments for all the Eastern European countries.

Keywords: *EU, Eurasia, Russia, Armenia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan*

The Eurasian Integration Project

The Eurasian integration project (including Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan) was partly inspired by the EU, but it was developed into a specific economic and geopolitical bloc which competes with the EU in the ex-Soviet space. Russia uses the Eurasian project as a geopolitical instrument, trying to ensure its hegemony in the ex-Soviet area. Russia prioritized the enlargement of the Eurasian Customs Union in 2013-2014. Armenia's decision to join this body instead of signing its Association Agreement with the EU was 'Russia's first success story' in the enlargement of the Eurasian Customs Union. Russia used a successful 'stick and carrots' policy to bring this about. It was a shocking *volte-face* announced by the Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, during his meeting with Vladimir Putin in Russia, in September 2013. Charles Tannock (British MEP) stated that 'the President of Armenia went to Moscow, was summoned by President Putin, and told that if he went ahead with his Euro-Atlantic aspirations, in terms of getting closer to the EU by having this free-trade agreement, that would be the end of the Russian security guarantees'.¹ Indeed, if Russia withdrew its Russian security guarantees for its Armenian ally, Armenia would be very vulnerable in case of a possible military attack from Azerbaijan, in the disputed breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Also, if Russia increased the gas price, the Armenian citizens would be seriously affected and would protest and this would threaten President Sargsyan's leadership.²

On July 18th 2013, President Aliyev officially declared that Azerbaijan had purchased military equipment from Russia and Israel, paying considerable sums. This is because Aliyev believed that the military power had a key role in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

¹ Euronews, (4.09.2013)

² Emerson, M. and Kostanyan, H. (2013) 'Putin's grand design to destroy EU's Eastern Partnership and replace it with a disastrous neighbourhood policy of his own'. *CEPS Commentaries*, 17th September 2013. Available at: <http://ceps.be/book/putin%E2%80%99s-grand-design-destroy-eu%E2%80%99s-eastern-partnership-and-replace-it-disastrous-neighbourhood-p>

By such statements, President Aliyev psychologically prepared the population and the international community for this eventuality.³

Azerbaijan collaborates intensively with Turkey, while Turkey's border continues to be closed to Armenia. On July 17th 2013, Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu in Baku declared his wish that this conflict should be resolved in the shortest time 'within the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan'. Davutoglu stated that 20% of the Azerbaijani territory is under Armenian military occupation and the OSCE Minsk Group could not do anything for a peaceful resolution of the conflict for 20 years.⁴

The frozen conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenia and Azerbaijan), in South-Ossetia and Abkhazia (Georgia), Transnistria (Republic of Moldova), and the new conflict in Donbas (Ukraine), the Russian gas price and some political parties (such as the Socialists' Party of Igor Dondon, the Communists' Party of Vladimir Voronin, the Fatherland Party of Renato Usatii in Republic of Moldova) are used to block the European ex-Soviet country's path towards the EU and to increase Kremlin's influence. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova refused to join the Eurasian Union in 2013-2014, and suffered from Kremlin's pressure. When the pro-Russian Regime in Ukraine was reversed by Euromaidan, and replaced by a pro-EU government, Russia annexed Crimea and the separatist violent conflict in Donbas has started (2014).

Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia

The Russian decision to welcome Armenia into the Eurasian Customs Union raised discontent in Belarus and Kazakhstan. The Russian expert Feodor Lukyanov pointed out that 'Russia considers it necessary to have Armenia in the Customs Union for geopolitical reasons', but Belarus and Kazakhstan have no geopolitical or economic interest in Armenia's accession. Belarus's and Kazakhstan's relations with Azerbaijan were more important than those with Armenia. First Lukashenko wished to strengthen the institutions and regulations of the Eurasian Customs Union, and only then to pursue its enlargement. In Lukyanov's view, **'this is not about Armenia: Lukashenko is against Russia's domination on the Customs Union'**.⁵

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko issued a statement rejecting Armenia's accession, because Moscow did not consult him and because he considered that the Azerbaijanis' position should be taken into account. Belarus pays great attention to maintaining good relations with Azerbaijan, a country which produces energy. 'Armenia has an unresolved territorial dispute with Azerbaijan. This means that there will be problems with Azerbaijan. As I understand, Ilham Aliyev has put this issue to the Kazakhstani President. We need to consider this issue' said Lukashenko. He further claimed that the Eurasian Customs Union should not grant membership to the countries with territorial conflicts (such as

³ Ghegamian, A (2013) 'The Alternative of Armenia's accession to the Eurasian Customs Union is the War', *Regnum.ru*, 27 July (Арташес Гегамян: Альтернативой вхождению Армении в Евразийский союз является война, 27.07.2013). Available at: <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1688749.htm>

⁴ Ghegamian, (27.07.2013), op.cit.

⁵ Lukyanov, F. (2013) 'This is not about Armenia: Lukashenko is against Russia's domination on the Customs Union'. *Regnum.ru*, 24th October ('Армения ни при чем: Лукашенко против доминирования России в Таможенном союзе' - Федор Лукьянов, 24.10.2013). Available at: <http://www.regnum.ru/news/fd-abroad/armenia/1723870.html>

Armenia). The special status of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South-Ossetia within the Customs Union was an issue of concern for the CU Member States with no clear solution.⁶ These concerns on the Eurasian CU can be compared with EU's concerns regarding these kinds of problems.

Belarus wanted a customs union in which all member states should be equal. Belarus and Kazakhstan would have to participate in the decision-making on Armenia's accession to the Customs Union, 'so as not to face a *fait accompli* from Moscow'. The enlargement of the Eurasian Customs Union should come only after its deepening and after the decision-making mechanism has been established.⁷

Lukyanov considered that Azerbaijan would be required to join the Customs Union only if there were some substantial changes in the region, especially Turkey's accession to the Customs Union, whereupon Azerbaijan would follow. Ankara could talk about accession to the Eurasian Customs Union merely to put pressure on the EU.⁸

The Eurasian Customs Union Summit in Minsk (24th October 2013)

A summit of the Eurasian Customs Union was organised on 24th October 2013, in Minsk, in order to demonstrate Kremlin's successful policy on the Eurasian regional integration, one month before EU's Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius. At the meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, in Minsk on 24th October 2013 the presidents of the Eurasian Customs Union member states, Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus participated, but not only them. They were accompanied by representatives from Armenia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, countries that have declared their willingness to join the Customs Union, as well as the President of Ukraine, Yanukovich.⁹

At the Summit in Minsk, the presidents of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan announced that an **agreement would be signed in May 2014 to bring the Eurasian Union into force on 1st January 2015**, in accordance with the original timetable. That would be the process of deepening the Eurasian integration. The process of enlargement was also illustrated. During the summit in Minsk, **Armenia's declaration of its readiness to join the Customs Union was officially adopted**, as well as a memorandum to deepen the co-operation between Armenia and the Eurasian Economic Commission. Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev raised the **idea of Turkey** being admitted to the Customs Union.¹⁰

The Summit in Minsk adopted a package of documents on Armenia's accession to the Customs Union; directions for the development of the integration; a framework law on competition; the annual report on the budget execution by the Eurasian Economic Commission in 2012; and control of the asset declarations of the Commission's members led by Viktor Borisovich Khristenko.¹¹

⁶ Lukyanov, (24.10.2013), op cit.

⁷ Lukyanov, (24.10.2013), op cit.

⁸ Lukyanov, (24.10.2013), op. cit.

⁹ Wierzbowska-Miazga, Ag. (2013) 'The Customs Union summit: crisis instead of success', *OSW Eastweek*, 30 October. Available at: <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/eastweek/2013-10-30/customs-union-summit-crisis-instead-success>

¹⁰ Wierzbowska-Miazga (2013), op cit.

¹¹ *Riia Novosti*, (24.10.2013)

At the Summit it was decided that a ‘road map’ would be elaborated for Armenia’s and Kyrgyzstan’s accession to the Customs Union.¹² Putin said that Ukraine would not enter the Customs Union if it signed EU’s DCFTA. This is because Ukraine would then apply the EU trade policy rules that are not compatible with those of the Eurasian Customs Union.¹³ The President Vladimir Putin tried to persuade the President Viktor Yanukovich to join the Eurasian integration process. Two days later, Putin and Yanukovich met again in Sochi (Russia), but without disclosing publicly the results.¹⁴ But, after the CIS Summit was organised on 20th-21st November 2013 at St Petersburg, Brussels was shocked by Ukraine’s decision to not sign the Association Agreement with the EU.

At the Summit in Minsk, Nazarbayev stated publicly that **Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan** could join the Customs Union as observers, and Putin agreed.¹⁵ Nazarbayev mentioned his previous discussion with Erdogan about the idea of Turkey’s access to the Customs Union in order to erase the image of the ex-Soviet Union’s revival under the Russian hegemony.¹⁶ Nazarbayev declared that a Turkish group (Kazakhstan +Turkey) would counter-balance the Slavic group (Russia+Belarus) in the Eurasian regional project. However, this idea is unrealistic, because Turkey is a member of the EU’s Customs Union, a candidate for EU, a NATO Member, and is opposed to Russia in the Syrian crisis. Arguably, Turkey could discuss the idea of joining the Eurasian regional project only in order to apply pressure in the negotiations with the EU and to play a role as a regional power with different options and directions of action in the foreign relations.

Putin did not express any position on Turkey’s accession, but later he met Erdogan in Ankara where he discussed the Russian-Turkish co-operation in the Shanghai Organisation. At Minsk, Putin stated that ‘the prime minister of India asked to examine the possibility of signing an agreement on the free trade with the Customs Union’. Lukashenko also stated that Israel, New Zealand and Vietnam were interested in collaborating with it.¹⁷

As the Polish expert Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga (from the Centre for Eastern Studies – OSW) underlined, during the Summit in Minsk, Presidents Nazarbayev and Lukashenko presented ‘**a whole catalogue of objections**’ concerning the current state of the Eurasian integration. They asked for the removal of the barriers to energy co-operation (duties, transport barriers), and criticized Russia’s strong dominance on the whole process: its use of integration as a tool to implement its own foreign-policy goals, including the case of Armenia’s accession; the inequality between the member states; the Russian influence on the Eurasian Commission, numerically dominated by the Russian officials and experts, answerable to Kremlin; and the modelling of the Customs Union regulations on the Russian legislation. Indeed, the regional organization would not make significant progress without

¹² Dubnov, A. (2013) ‘Customs Union: plus Turkey, minus Ukraine, India -in mind?’ *Riia Novosti*, 25th October (Аркадий Дубнов, ‘Таможенный союз: плюс – Турция, минус – Украина, Индия – в уме?’, 25.10.2013, РИА Новости). Available at: <http://ria.ru/analytics/20131025/972555134.html>

¹³ *Riia Novosti*, (25.10.2013)

¹⁴ Wierzbowska-Miazga (2013), op cit.

¹⁵ Dubnov, (2013), op. cit.

¹⁶ Dubnov, (2013), op.cit.

¹⁷ Dubnov, (2013), op cit.

removing the many barriers and limitations to co-operation and without a reform of its institutions and decision-making mechanisms.¹⁸

At the Summit in Minsk, Nazarbayev proposed publicly the dissolution of the Eurasian Economic Community, as it overlaps with the Customs Union.¹⁹ Putin agreed with Nazarbayev on the dissolution of the Eurasian Economic Community, only on condition that the legal basis of the Customs Union should not be lost.²⁰ Indeed, the Treaty on the Eurasian Union (2014) was planned to merge and codify all the treaties and agreements in a single document, eliminating the contradictions between the existing legal norms.²¹ This corresponds to Nazarbayev's vision: he argued that the Treaty would be signed in May 2014 and that, from 1st January 2015, the Eurasian Economic Union would begin the operations. President Nazarbayev underlined that he was the author of the idea of founding the Eurasian Union, in 1994.²² Nazarbayev believes that the individual states acting alone cannot solve their problems, but only together in the Eurasian Union. But the Eurasian Union should be based on equality and the mutual benefit of states.²³

Nazarbayev clearly stated that the Eurasian Union should be 'purely economic in nature, and there is no way it can become a political organization';²⁴ there would be 'no return to the USSR'. He made this critical statement on 18th January 2013, at a meeting with the diplomats accredited in Astana. This statement was preceded by criticizing the idea of establishing a Eurasian Parliament (September 2012), as well as by the decision in December 2012 for Kazakhstan to adopt the Latin alphabet by 2025, replacing the Cyrillic alphabet still in use today.²⁵ Kazakhstan's President is **a partisan of the economic integration**, but he is against the transformation of the economic projects into a platform of political integration, dominated by Russia. This kind of Russian-led political integration is contrary to the policy Nazarbayev has maintained over the last two decades, of strengthening Kazakhstan's sovereignty, and of playing an independent role on the global stage.²⁶ Belarus also supported Kazakhstan's criticism of the Russian hegemony in the Eurasian Customs Union.

Alexander Lukashenko tried to present himself as 'the main integrator of the post-Soviet space' and as a very important founder of and decision-maker in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Eurasian entity.²⁷ He recalled the history of the CIS 'in such a way that he was at the forefront' (which was not the case). He also stated that Belarus is under-represented in the structures of the Eurasian Economic Commission, which is

¹⁸ Wierzbowska-Miazga, (2013), op cit.

¹⁹ Dubnov, (2013), op cit.

²⁰ Dubnov, (2013), op. cit.

²¹ Mission of the Russian Federation to the EU (2012) 'Presentation of the Eurasian Economic Commission'. *Russian Mission*. Available at: <http://www.russianmission.eu/en/news/presentation-eurasian-economic-commission>

²² Dubnov, (2013), op cit.

²³ Riia Novosti, (24.10.2013)

²⁴ Jarosiewicz, Al. (2013) 'Kazakhstan distances itself from Moscow's integration projects', *OSW Eastweek*, 23rd January. Available at: <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/eastweek/2013-01-23/kazakhstan-distances-itself-moscow-s-integration-projects>

²⁵ Jarosiewicz, (2013), op.cit.

²⁶ Jarosiewicz, (2013), op cit.

²⁷ Hodasevich, A. (2013) 'Lukashenka without live microphone'. *Nezavissimaya Gazeta*, 22nd October (Антон Ходасевич, 'У Лукашенко отобрали микрофон'). Available at: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2013-10-22/6_minsk.html

dominated by the experts from Russia and Kazakhstan. He underlined that Belarus has the means to negotiate hard with Russia; Belarus can block the pipelines and the rail transport for the Russian and Kazakhstani products towards the West. Lukashenko wanted to re-negotiate the shape and the competences - of the Eurasian 'supranational' institutions - with Putin, and to agree on 'what proportion of the sovereignty is transferred to the supranational bodies and for what purpose'. Minsk is ready to share even more of its sovereignty. 'Yes, we are an independent sovereign state', Lukashenko said, 'but if we want something and see it is paying off, we will go for it. Sovereignty in this case is not an icon to pray to. We will use sovereignty for the benefit of our nations'.²⁸

Conclusions

The Eurasian integration project has its own difficulties. In order to ensure the sustainability of its regional integration project, Russia needs to develop its attractiveness and offer win-win situations to its partners inside and outside the Customs Union. However, Vladimir Putin uses hard power instruments, generated a conflict in Ukraine, and leads a cold war-like geopolitical battle in Eastern Europe in 2013-15.

In the short term, the EU has no instruments to fight against Russia and to win a geopolitical battle against Moscow in Armenia. The nature of the EU does not allow a Cold War-like geopolitical battle. However, the 28 Member States have important means if they will act together. The EU needs a more strategic approach to its neighbourhood countries and to make them a more generous offer (money, market, mobility), with clear positive benefits for the citizens. The visa-free regime granted to the Republic of Moldova for 2014, the autonomous trade measures to open the EU market for wine and other products, the free trade area and the gas inter-connection projects are good examples. An enlarged participation in the EU programmes, a structured dialogue on justice and on public administration reform and high-level dialogues may be useful mechanisms. If they make progress, Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine should see 'the light at the end of the tunnel', namely the prospect of EU membership. The principle 'more for more' (less for less) should gradually include the status of the 'associated membership' and 'candidate' for some Eastern Partnership countries when they are ready and the EU is ready. The stages could be: partner countries, associated countries, potential candidates, candidates. Unfortunately, in the current context (2013-15) the enlargement policy is not envisaged yet for the Eastern Partnership countries because of the economic crisis, the enlargement fatigue and because of the difficult internal situation of eastern countries. However, the short-term measures and a long-term strategy with conditionality, rewards and stages are needed. The EU Enlargement was the strongest EU foreign policy instrument and transformed the largest part of the continent in the benefit of 'the old' and 'the new' EU Member States.²⁹ The Commissioner Füle is right: 'If you are serious about finishing the transformation of the European continent, then the association

²⁸ Hodasevich, (22.10.2013), op cit.

[1] ²⁹ Vachudova, M. A. (2014) 'EU Leverage and National Interests in the Balkans: The Puzzles of Enlargement Ten Years On'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 52: 122–138.

accords are not going to be enough. The enlargement is the most important transformation instrument the EU has'.³⁰

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³⁰ Dempsey, J. (2013) 'The Transformative Power of EU Enlargement: an Interview with Štefan Füle'. *Carnegie Europe*, 28th November. Available at: <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=53742>.

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