

## The Norm Contestation and the Balance of Soft Power in the Post-Soviet Region: The Eurasian Economic Union versus the European Union

### Eski Sovyet Coğrafyasında Norm Mücadelesi ve Yumuşak Güç Dengesi: Avrasya Ekonomik Birliği ve Avrupa Birliği Arasındaki Rekabet

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#### Abstract

This paper examines the power political norm contestation between the European Union (EU) and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). In recent years, the EAEU has increased its regional attractiveness, while the EU's appeal has declined due to its internal problems, the impediments to further enlargement, the failure of color revolutions, and the rise of authoritarianism and nationalism in the region. This situation has provided Russia with significant advantages in consolidating its regional sphere of influence through promoting an alternative regional governance mechanism under its own terms and leadership. The paper compares the organizational structures and normative agendas of the EU and the EAEU. In this regard, it analyzes how Russia's project reconciles regional countries' increasing demand for national sovereignty with their need for regional economic cooperation. The paper argues that the soft power vacuum left by the EU in the region is being filled by Russia which has not behaved solely as a "spoiler" but developed a normative framework based on sovereignty, strong leadership, and other so-called "traditional Eurasian values." The paper examines the links between those values and the EAEU's rising attractiveness for some regional countries from a comparative perspective.

#### Keywords

Norm contestation, Soft power, Eurasian Economic Union, European Union, Regional integration

#### Öz

Bu makale, Avrupa Birliği (AB) ve Rusya liderliğindeki Avrasya Ekonomik Birliği (AEB) arasındaki güç rekabeti esasına dayanan norm mücadelesini incelemektedir. Son yıllarda AEB'nin bölgesel çekiciliği artarken; AB'nin cazibesi kendi iç sorunları, daha fazla genişlemenin önündeki engeller, renkli devrimlerin başarısızlığı, bölgede otoriterliğin ve milliyetçiliğin yükselişi gibi nedenlerle azalmaktadır. Bu durum, Rusya'nın kendi koşulları ve liderliği altında alternatif bir bölgesel yönetim mekanizması oluşturarak bölgesel etki alanını sağlamlaştırması yolunda önemli avantajlar sağlamıştır. Makale, AB ve AEB'nin örgütsel yapılarını ve normatif gündemlerini karşılaştırmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Rusya'nın projesinin bölge ülkelerinin artan ulusal egemenlik talepleri ve bölgesel ekonomik işbirliği ihtiyacı arasındaki çelişkiyi nasıl uzlaştırdığı analiz edilmektedir. Çalışma, AB'nin bölgede bıraktığı yumuşak güç boşluğunun; egemenlik ve güçlü liderlik gibi "geleneksel Avrasya değerleri" olarak tanımlanan unsurlara dayalı normatif bir çerçeve geliştiren Rusya tarafından doldurulmakta olduğunu savunmaktadır. Makale, bu tür değerler ve AEB'nin belirli bölge ülkeleri nazarında artan cazibesi arasındaki bağlantıları karşılaştırmalı bir perspektiften incelemektedir.

#### Anahtar Kelimeler

Norm mücadelesi, Yumuşak güç, Avrasya Ekonomik Birliği, Avrupa Birliği, Bölgesel entegrasyon

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## Introduction

Since the 2000s, the post-Soviet region has been an area of competition between the EU and Russian-led Eurasian integration projects which have sought to promote regional integration frameworks based on different norms and values. This regional competition culminated in late 2013 when Ukraine was negotiating its Association Agreement with the EU. During the negotiations, the EU offered Ukraine some financial assistance but the agreement included certain institutional and democratic reforms. On the other side, Russia wanted to integrate Ukraine into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and offered a \$15 billion loan without any EU-like conditionality (Plekhanov, 2016, p. 13; Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2015, p. 87). President Viktor Yanukovich opted for Russia's offer that would provide necessary financial sources to consolidate his authoritarian regime. However, Yanukovich's decision prompted civil protests in the country, which led to the regime's fall. The crisis was followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea and later evolved into a proxy war in Ukraine. Those developments caused the resurgence of military competition and tensions between Russia and NATO reminiscent of the Cold War era.<sup>1</sup>

Regional analysts and observers tend to concentrate on the military dimension of regional power politics between Russia and the Western powers, namely the USA and its European allies in NATO. However, the struggle for power and influence in the region is driven not only by traditional geopolitical interests but also by conflicting geo-economic and normative interests to shape regional economic and political governance. To ignore the latter aspect of the regional competition between the West and Russia, which ignited the spark of the Ukraine crisis could lead to incomplete analyses. The future of the regional order in the post-Soviet region will not be determined only through geopolitical and military power competition. There is another emerging critical aspect of competition based on regional integration frameworks and normative agendas that influence the political and economic preferences of local states and constrain the penetration and actions of international powers. In the last two decades, Russia has increased its experience in using a number of new instruments such as norms, values, and institutions to becloud Western initiatives to intervene in regional politics. Driving on such instruments, Russia primarily aims at promoting an alternative regional integration framework that is not based on liberal-democratic values. This represents a significant challenge to the European Union, which has enjoyed a superior normative power in shaping the region during the 1990s and the early 2000s.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which was established in 2015, has appeared as an important cornerstone of Russia's new regional vision challenging the EU's influence in the region. The EAEU members include Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Moldova and Uzbekistan joined the organization as observer members respectively in 2017 and 2020. As an organization pursuing economic integration, the Eurasian Economic Union emerged as a regional counterpart of the EU that maintains some forms of partnership relations with the same post-Soviet countries. This paper

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1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 26<sup>th</sup> IPSA World Congress of Political Science, "New Nationalisms in an Open World," July 10-15, 2021. The study was completed before the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2022, whose regional implications are still evolving and not certain yet. Therefore, this paper excludes the developments following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and covers the norm contestation between the EU and Russia's regional integration project from the early 2000s to 2021

examines the normative framework, organizational structure, and regional agenda of the EAEU in comparison with those of the European Union. It aims at understanding the main reasons why the Russian-led Eurasian integration has increased its appeal to several regional states in recent years. The paper accepts that Russia resorts to hard power against certain countries where the attraction and influence of the EU remain still strong. However, it specifically argues that Russia has been filling the soft power vacuum left by the EU as a result of its normative retreat from most of the region. The paper investigates the main causes of such a shift in the “balance of soft power” in the post-Soviet region touching upon some significant international and regional developments.

The first section deals with theoretical discussions on the growing significance and role of norms, values, and institutions in the current-era global and regional power politics. It refers to the newly emerging “post-realist” literature on norm contestation which examines how norms, values, and institutions can be used as instruments in struggles for power and influence. The second section focuses on alternative regionalisms in the post-Soviet neighborhood embodied in the Eurasian integration project and the EU’s regional partnership initiatives. The links between the EAEU’s organizational structure and the main norms it advocates such as national sovereignty and strong leadership are also examined. The third section elaborates on the primary reasons for the weakening of the EU’s conditionality and soft power in the post-Soviet area such as the crisis of liberal values in Europe, its international repercussions, the failure of color revolutions, and the impediments to further enlargement towards the region. Also, it examines Russia’s initiatives to fill the vacuum of normative agency in the region through building an alternative regional order based on “statist” values and the Russian ideal of “sovereign democracy.” Finally, the fourth section focuses on the rising attractiveness of the Russian-led Eurasian integration project in the perspective of some regional states. It also examines how different states have so far responded to the Russian-led integration initiative from a comparative perspective.

### **Rethinking Regional Power Politics: The Role of Norms, Values, and Institutions**

Power politics has been a central concept in the realist literature on international relations (Morgenthau, 1948; Mearsheimer, 2013). Originally the concept was, and still is, associated with military capabilities, alliances, and the balance of power. Military force and hard power are defined as the central tools of international power politics through which great powers deter their rivals, establish hegemony over smaller states, and ensure regional spheres of influence. Since the 1970s, the realist paradigm has been increasingly challenged by various alternative IR theories such as liberal, institutionalist, constructivist, and post-structuralist approaches. Those posited themselves against some core assumptions of realism and challenged the latter’s views on the salience of anarchy as a constitutive characteristic of international relations, the status of states as the primary actors in international politics, and the durability of “cooperation, international institutions, international law, and norms as critical features of international relations” (Goddard & Nexon, 2016, p. 7; see also Waeber, 1996).

Scholars on different sides of this debate continue to associate power politics primarily with military force and balances of power. They all accept that states which hold the

monopoly on the use of force remain the central actors when considering traditional power politics. However, the main point of disagreement is the potential of international institutions to influence and change state behavior. Liberal approaches suggest that international institutions, norms, and values could somehow reshape international relations by supplanting the dynamics of power politics (Mearsheimer, 1994; Goddard & Nexon, 2016). In this respect, institutions are seen as primary instruments facilitating international cooperation and maintaining peace and stability in the world (Keohane & Martin, 1995).

The 1990s and the early 2000s witnessed the spread of Western liberal values throughout the world which has contributed to economic liberalization and globalization. This process was mostly guided by international institutions originating in the post-World War II Western world. Since the global crisis of 2008, however, liberal norms and institutions have been increasingly challenged by non-Western powers such as a rising China and a resurgent Russia (Cooley, 2015). The emerging rivalry between those actors and the West has not been limited to military power, arms buildup, and geopolitical competition over critical regions and allies. As non-Western major powers have been integrated into the international economic system after the Cold War, the current-era global power competition involves the intensive use of economic statecraft. In this respect, the rising non-Western powers formulate trade policies, investment programs, and regional integration projects not just to improve mutually beneficial relations with other states but to increase their international power and political influence and to promote geo-economic objectives at global and regional levels (Wigell, Scholvin, & Aaltola, 2018).

In order to enhance their political and economic position in an increasingly multipolar world, those powers have created some international institutions such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the AIIB (Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank), the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), and the EAEU (Gürçan, 2020). Such institutions not only facilitate economic and political cooperation between the members but also bring along normative frameworks which are not based on Western liberal democratic values. In the post-Soviet area, the SCO and the EAEU have commonly built a conservative sovereignty-focused normative framework that supports, consolidates, and legitimizes a statist and authoritarian regional order (Allison, 2018; Kobayashi, 2017). This helps regional states to resist normative pressures from liberal actors outside of the region; and, therefore, beclouds Western attempts to interfere in regional politics and to reshape regional political and economic governance based on their values and interests (Allison, 2018; Noutcheva, 2018).

Could decades-old IR paradigms originating in the Cold War era explain new dynamics of power politics between the Western powers and the rising powers from other parts of the world, which include geopolitical, geo-economic, and normative dimensions altogether? Norms, values, and institutions are usually disregarded by those who have a realist vision of world politics and concentrate on military capabilities and alliances. On the other side, liberal institutionalism has a predominantly optimistic view of international institutions suggesting that the proliferation of institutions would promote stability in international relations at global and regional levels. In the contemporary world, however, a growing number of international institutions and cooperation frameworks do not embrace Western

liberal values. Some of them follow different normative agendas concerning the members' relations with each other and their approach towards their neighborhood. What if two rival economic organizations or integration blocs with their own ideational perspective seek to expand their respective values in a shared region? The post-Soviet region has been a striking example of such a zero-sum norm competition. In the last decade, the deeper and wider involvement of European and Eurasian integration initiatives in the region has not contributed to the stability of the post-Soviet neighborhood. On the contrary "the region has become ever more conflict-prone, with the Ukrainian crisis being just the tip of the iceberg" (Kobayashi, 2017, p. 2).

As the realist and liberal institutionalist theories fall short in capturing such a significant aspect of regional politics, we need alternative research frameworks to analyze the real dynamics of competition for influence between the EU and the Russian-led EAEU. In their article entitled "The Dynamics of Global Power Politics," Goddard and Nexon (2016) call for a new research program for the phenomena that goes beyond the structural-realist framework. The Authors define power politics as "involving politics based on the use of power to influence the actions and decisions of actors that claim, or exercise, authority over a political community" (Goddard & Nexon., pp. 9-10). Considering the complicated nature of 21st Century international politics, they suggest that non-military means such as "economic, cultural, symbolic, diplomatic, and other instruments" matter a great deal for contemporary power politics. The Authors define their approach as "post-realist" which does not view "international organizations, international law, norms, rules, and other favorite topics of liberals and constructivists" as alternatives to power politics but significant "means, medium, subjects, and objects in the struggle for influence" (Goddard & Nexon, p. 6).

How can international institutions, norms, and values actually function as instruments in the struggle for influence in a specific region? Bettiza and Lewis (2020) develop a power political approach to "norm contestation" which examines the battles for influence in international politics taking place at "the ideational level" and driving on "symbolic instruments." Originally, this approach combines insights from the existing literature on "norm contestation" with Goddard and Nexon's eclectic analytical framework on "power politics." Bettiza and Lewis (2020) suggest that struggles in the form of norm contestation usually emerge as a part of power politics since identities and norms are sites of power relations. In general, power political maneuvers aim at expanding one's agency and collective mobilization capacity vis-à-vis the others. Such moves include some combination of two inclusionary strategies, namely, "fragmentation" and "integration." The former strategy aims at disrupting, preventing, breaking apart, and ultimately interfering with the ability of others to follow joint action. At the ideational level, such attempts intend to erode the power and appeal of certain norms shared by rival actors, to undermine their capacity, and to constrain actions in ways favoring dominant norm-maker states. On the other side integrative power political moves aim to expand "one's agency and collective mobilization capability through the articulation of different interpretations of existing norms or the generation of alternative collectively shared [norms,] identities and principles that more closely align with one's values and interests" (Bettiza & Lewis, p. 6).

One could find many examples of normative power political maneuvers by Russia vis-a-vis the West in general, and the European Union in particular, which follows the logic of fragmentation and integration. On the one side, Russia aims at keeping the EU divided by supporting far-right and anti-EU movements and underlining the crisis of liberal values in some of the member states (Weiss, 2020; Financial Times, 2009). On the other side, Russia challenges the notion of universal human rights, as a leading authoritarian power, and propagates alternative norms based on stability, security, state sovereignty, and civilizational diversity vis-a-vis the Western notion of liberal democracy. While the Western liberal world is going under “a crisis of confidence”, such values enjoy significant backing in various parts of the international system not to mention Russia’s post-Soviet neighborhood. This situation increases Russia’s soft power capability, and, accordingly, the appeal of the Eurasian integration initiative supported by Moscow, which promotes solidarity around alternative and authoritarian-friendly norms (see Walker, 2016).

Bettiza and Lewis also examine different forms of norm contestation including “civilizational essentialization” and “counter-norm entrepreneurship” which are also significant considering the research objectives of this study. Civilizational essentialization is about the articulation of certain forms of regional and domestic identities, which are defined by a set of normative and cultural characteristics and are portrayed as “other” to, and are mobilized to challenge the universality of liberal norms and identities. (Bettiza & Lewis, 2020, p. 10). As civilizational essentialization aims at creating common norms and identities, it emerges as a primarily integrative power political maneuver. It is utilized by Russia to advocate a regional integration framework based on “traditional Eurasian values.” As Chebenkova (2016, p. 1) suggests, Russia’s conservatism and civilizational approach seeks to establish an ideational and political alternative to the West, and proposes a unique model for international relations architecture, where Russia would enjoy a special position and significant influence.

Counter-norm entrepreneurship is another form of norm contestation which is generally implemented in opposition to liberal projects. It includes attempts to promote a coherent collection of illiberal practices, ideas, and institutions worldwide, which represent “an ideological alternative to liberal forms of domestic and international order” (Bettiza & Lewis, 2020, p. 11). Counter-norm entrepreneurship can also be practiced as an integrative power political maneuver that aims to activate and build common norms and identities around social sites and relevant actors (Bettiza & Lewis, p. 10). A recent work by Keating and Kaczmarek (2019) examines how Russia utilizes counter-norms such as illiberal governance, strong leadership, and sovereignty to attract international support for its anti-Western and anti-American foreign policy.

In this respect, Russia’s power political approach to norm contestation represents a significant dynamic of regional power politics in Eurasia which is not based on hard power instruments but implemented through nonviolent practices including discourses, diplomatic initiatives, advocacy activities, or processes of institution-building based on alternative norms and values (see Bettiza & Lewis, 2020, p. 8). Such practices are often associated with soft power which is defined by Joseph Nye (2004, p. x) as the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion, sanctions, or bribery. Soft power arises from the appeal of a country’s values, culture, and political ideals and rests

on the ability to manipulate the agenda of political preferences. It could be practiced through multilateral diplomacy and international institutions (Nye, 2004, p. 5, 31). The next section examines how Russian-sponsored norms and values are incorporated into the Eurasian integration project which has increased its regional attractiveness vis-à-vis the EU in the current era marked by the rise of nationalism and authoritarianism.

### **Alternative Regionalisms in Eurasia: The European Union vs. the Eurasian Economic Union**

Regionalism could be defined as a “set of governance programs and strategies” which aims at “political, economic, and/or cultural cooperation” between the countries of a certain region (Gürçan, 2020, p. 132). In fact, regionalism is neither a Western nor a European idea, as it has had multiple manifestations worldwide. Yet, the literature on regionalism predominantly adopts a Euro-centric approach that has deeply influenced the development of conceptual tools and theoretical approaches in the field. As Acharya (2016) puts it, this “ethnocentric” approach ignores emerging regionalisms in the other parts of the world, which reflect distinct economic and political conditions and normative aspirations compared to the EU integration project that originated in post-World War II Europe. In other cases, the end goal of regionalism may not be integration in the sense of creating some degree of supranationalism, but more limited cooperation that would preserve state sovereignty and autonomy (Acharya, 2016).

Regional integration projects are embodied in international institutions which are usually classified as supranational or intergovernmental. The EU is located at the most supranational and highly institutionalized end of the spectrum (Dragneva, 2016). EU membership requires transferring sovereignty to common bodies and institutions. Accordingly, the process of membership involves political, economic, and legal reforms to meet the Union’s standards and values and to harmonize domestic legislation with the EU *acquis*. The prospect of membership contributes to the incentive for reform, thus, the enlargement is seen as “the most successful foreign policy instrument” of the EU (EC, 2003). The EU aims at developing a zone of prosperity and a friendly neighborhood where states would enjoy peaceful and cooperative relations. In this respect, the EU also encourages the reform process based on the common liberal values in neighboring countries that currently do not have a membership prospect such as Russia and some other post-Soviet states. Those states would in return benefit from closer economic cooperation and integration with the EU (EC, 2003).

To promote Western liberal values in its Eastern neighborhood, the EU has adopted a strategy called “political conditionality” that offers material rewards such as financial assistance and benefits from full membership on the condition that states comply with the norms of liberal democracy (Schimmelfennig, 2005, p. 106). This policy of conditionality is incorporated in membership processes and other available programs and instruments of partnership for regional countries such as European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), Eastern Partnership (EaP), Partnership and Cooperation Agreements, and Association Agreements (Tatiashvili, 2016). Through these initiatives, the EU has sought to build a liberal democratic model of governance in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) region based on its political norms and values. The process was supported by official EU

pronouncements which have been crucial for articulating what is appropriate in certain contexts and situations and for delegitimizing democratic malpractice (Noutcheva, 2018).

Since the early 2000s, the EU has increasingly engaged itself with Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. The ENP which was launched in 2004 brought a sea-change in the process of institutionalization of European values in the region, while it extended the policy of conditionality for regional countries with no prospect of an immediate membership. The new initiative emphasized liberal values such as “democracy, pluralism, respect for human rights, civil liberties, and the rule of law” and portrayed them as essential prerequisites for regional “political stability” and “sustained economic development” (Kobayashi, 2017, p. 13). Those values have been the essence of the new normative order intended to be built by the EU, which normalized and legitimized the collapse of the statist regimes through “color revolutions” in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004/05), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) (Kobayashi, 2017).

The chain of color revolutions in the post-Soviet region hastened Russian initiatives to construct regional institutions based on a distinct normative framework that would delimit the EU’s increasing regional influence and promote a regional integration under its own terms and political leadership. Those initiatives were supported by Russian efforts which concentrated on delegitimizing Western support for democracy in the region and on projecting a coherent political governance model based on alternative values. In this respect, Russia made strong condemnations of regime changes following civil mobilizations as examples of an illegitimate subversion of legally elected governments (Noutcheva, 2018, p. 318). The European and Russian views towards regional stability in the post-Soviet neighborhood began to substantially diverge from each other. While the EU preconditioned sustained regional stability with an externally triggered liberal and democratic reform process, Russia delegitimized revolutionary regime changes as a “destabilization” factor which lead to the emergence of crises at regional and domestic political levels (Kobayashi, 2017; Nikitina, 2014).

From the Russian perspective, the regional stability in the post-Soviet area could be built on the basis of an alternative set of “statist” norms. Statism as an ideology has always been very influential in Russian domestic politics, which advocates increasing and preserving the strong role of the state and its capability to sustain the political, social, and international order (Kasymov, 2012, p. 61). It is seen as the best way to protect the nation against various external security threats and foreign encroachments. In this respect, the state is considered to have a universally valid timeless value, and, accordingly, it is positioned on the “pedestal.” Other segments such as society, economy, and culture are subordinated to the state, in contrast to Western civilization, where they are autonomous from the state or on an identical level with the state (Horemuž, 2015, p. 18). In this respect, statism supports and advocates some relevant norms and values like sovereignty, strong leadership, and illiberal governance which have increased their appeal in recent years not only in the post-Soviet region but also in various parts of the globe (Keating & Kaczmarek, 2019).

Since the early 2000s, Russia has repeatedly introduced ambitious regional integration projects often modeled on the EU but evolved into distinctive organizational and normative frameworks. The Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) was established in 2000



to build a common market in the name of the Eurasian Customs Union which ultimately came into existence in 2010. In 2012, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus transformed this Custom Union into a Single Economic Space (SES). The SES was started with the objectives of promoting a common market for products, “services, labour and capital; the coordination of monetary policies, financial and tax policies; the development of unified transport, energy and information systems and the unification of systems of state support for innovation and priority sectoral development” (Mostafa & Mahmood, 2017, p. 165). In May 2014, those three countries signed the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union, which transformed the SES into a full economic union. The EAEU Treaty came into force on January 1, 2015. The membership of Armenia and Kyrgyzstan became effective later in 2015 (Khitakhunov et al., 2017; Sergi, 2018). In this respect, the EAEU which was established in 2015 emerged as the latest initiative by Russia to build a multilateral regional institution in the post-Soviet neighborhood (Busygina & Filippov, 2020).

As an alternative to European integration, the EAEU works to protect and legitimize a statist regional order in the post-Soviet region (Kobayashi, 2017). This is one of the main reasons why the EAEU project falls short of creating supranational organizations that would weaken the role of the state and instead puts a strong emphasis on national sovereignty. Article 3 of the Treaty on Eurasian Economic Union (2014) underlines the principles of sovereign equality of the members and the respect for the differences of their political structures. In this regard, the EAEU diverges from the European integration that is based on shared political liberal values. It seems to be closer to the idea of East Asia’s integration which does not seek a universal and maximum possible integration, but a controlled and selective integration limited to the economic realm under the control of sovereign states (Rivera & Garashchuk, 2016).

Intergovernmental organizations like the EAEU could have some common bodies, which are not independent from the member countries, especially from their executive branches. The binding decisions could only be taken with unanimity, which ensures that governments cannot be bound against their will. The EAEU features such an organizational setting whose principal decision-making forums are its Councils (Dragneva, 2016). The highest body of the Union is the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council which consists of the heads of member states. The Eurasian Intergovernmental Council is the junior one including the prime ministers of members. There is no departure from the unanimity rule in the decision-making processes in these bodies. Binding decisions are taken only by consensus with no sacrifice from the national sovereignty of member states. In addition, the Supreme Council including the heads of states cannot be constrained by the decisions of other bodies. Any limitation of national sovereignty is conditional on the consent of all members and could be revoked (Dragneva, 2016). This system protects even the sovereignty of the smallest countries such as Armenia and Kyrgyzstan which are represented on an equal basis vis-à-vis other countries including Russia, the biggest economic power of the Union (Busygina & Filippov, 2020).

In fact, Russia has had some initiatives to create much stronger institutions with a considerable degree of supranationalism since the 2000s (Kobayashi, 2017; Mostafa & Mahmood, 2018, p. 165). In such attempts, Russia did not seek to replicate the EU model but to assert a regional hegemony by creating an appropriate framework that can be used

to convert Russian preponderant capabilities into a direct influence over the regional politics and domestic politics of the member countries (see Sergi, 2018). However, during the negotiations for the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union, Russian attempts to create supranational structures have been blocked by Russia's closest allies such as Belarus and Kazakhstan. A primary reason for that was the rising anxiety of regional states from Russia's hegemonic ambitions and interventionism after the Ukraine crisis and the Crimean annexation of 2014 (Busygina & Filippov, 2018, pp. 11-12).

The development of the Ukraine crisis showed Russia that applying too much pressure on its neighbors could lead to some unpredictable and even self-defeating results. This led Moscow to make substantial concessions to regional allies in the negotiation process for the EAEU, which increased the level of multilateralism and ensured the principle of intergovernmentalism in the Organization (Busygina & Filippov, 2018). In this respect, Russia relied less on hard power tactics and focused on increasing the appeal of the EAEU integration alternative based on its organizational structure and normative framework which respect national sovereignty and political concerns of the members.

On the other side, the rising nationalism and the awakened sovereignty sensitivities in the post-Soviet states, which coincided with global-level authoritarian tendencies, have played important factors in shaping the structure of the EAEU. In 2014, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev publicly suggested that the new Treaty for the EAEU "entirely excludes any kind of limitation or violation of Kazakh sovereignty". He maintained that "we have provided mechanisms excluding limitations or violation of our sovereignty at all levels" (Dragneva, 2016, p. 2). The increasing concerns on national values and sovereignty in recent years have also been translated into the cultural sphere. While preserving the official language status of Russian, the state document flow has been changed into the Kazakh language. In 2018, the President issued a declaration instructing Kazakh ministers and parliamentary deputies to use their national language at work. Despite increasing his economic and political partnership with Russia, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, since 2014, has also preferred to use the Belarusian language instead of Russian while delivering his official speeches (Busygina & Filippov, 2020).

In fact, national sovereignty concerns have long been an impediment on the way towards a successful and deeper integration in different regions throughout the world including Europe. In 1968, Richard Cooper defined the central problem of economic cooperation as "how to maintain openness while enabling states to retain sufficient autonomy" (quoted in Keohane, 2009, p. 35). In recent years the problem has ever increased with the rise of nationalism and sovereignty concerns in an economically open world. A growing percentage of people throughout the world express distrust in regional integration which is exploited by populist, nationalist or authoritarian political leaderships. The main question is, therefore, how to reconcile these political tendencies with regional integration projects already undergoing a deep crisis even in Europe (IPSA, 2021). In this respect, Russia's EAEU project appears as an up-to-date initiative to reconcile the need for regional economic cooperation and the rising sovereignty concerns of post-Soviet states through creating an intergovernmental organization and statist normative framework which protects regional authoritarian governance.

Scholars indicate that post-Soviet states which maintain a high level of interdependence in trade, energy, transportation, etc. could benefit from closer economic cooperation with each other and Russia. Regional states are particularly interested in expanding their access to Russia's natural resources and labor markets (Sergi, 2018, pp. 53-57; Busygina & Filippov, 2020, pp. 1-2). However, those states cannot entirely trust Russia which inherently maintains hegemonic ambitions towards the region. Therefore, more limited and pragmatic forms of regional economic cooperation like custom areas or some kind of preferential trade agreements would likely be much more successful. The EAEU's intergovernmental structure could protect the political and economic independence of regional states, which place national sovereignty at the top of their agenda (Busygina & Filippov, 2020). A public survey by Mariya Omelicheva (2015, p. 130) puts forward that national security, stability, and economic development are paramount also to the citizens of Central Asian states. According to the results, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek people all favor political stabilization and fast-track economic progress, which precedes democratization for the majority of respondents. For all these reasons above, the Eurasian integration initiative led by Russia has an increasing appeal for both regional political leaders and the majority of people of Central Asia.

### **The Balance of Soft Power: The EU Conditionality vs. Russia's Sovereign Democracy**

Russia's power political approach towards norms and values and the instrumentalization of such elements in its foreign policy based on nonviolent practices including discourse and institution-building processes constitutes a critical aspect of regional power politics. In this power political game, soft power tools play a central role. By creating its own alternative model of integration, Russia attempts to fill the vacuum caused by the decreasing appeal of the EU's regional initiatives. The current state of the "balance of soft power" in the region and the future changes in that balance will be one of the most crucial factors determining the results of the struggle for influence in regional politics between the EU and Russia. As Krastev and Leonard (2007, p. 2) put it; the future of the international order will be shaped not solely by the balance of hard power but by the balance of soft power namely "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion and payment, arising from the appeal of your culture, political ideals, and policies." This section applies this argument to the post-Soviet area and examines the main reasons why Russia's soft power capability has increased vis-à-vis the European Union for several regional states in varying degrees.

In the 1990s and the early 2000s, the EU's soft power increased throughout the region, which ran parallel to the rise and spread of Western liberal values in the world. The West's victory in the Cold War was achieved not through war but emerged as a result of the internal collapse of communism. According to Alexander Lukin (2014, pp. 43-45), this led to a euphoria underlined by "the end of history" theory by Francis Fukuyama, which proclaimed "the ultimate success and universal recognition of Western values and the Western, progressive social order." After the Soviet collapse, the former communist countries started political and economic transition processes which were by and large guided by liberal-democratic values championed by the West. This was the main factor enforcing the normative power of the EU in the region.

Since the global crisis of 2008, however, it has become commonplace to discuss the normative retreat of the West. The growing socio-economic problems, the mass migration, and the rising threat of international terrorism reinforced nationalism, populism, and illiberal political movements in the European Union. Such political tendencies growing in European countries such as Italy, the Netherlands, and Hungary have put the future of the EU project itself at serious risk (Cooley, 2015; Walker, 2016; Keating & Kaczmarek, 2019). Those developments facilitate Russia's power political maneuvers of norm contestation aiming at fragmenting the EU by supporting anti-liberal political actors and movements in Europe. The discourse used by President Putin in an interview conducted by the Financial Times (2019) could be considered a part of this strategy. While trumpeting the rise of populist national movements and leaders in Europe and the USA, Putin claims "liberalism is spent as an ideological force," which "outlived its purpose as the public turned against immigration, open borders, and multiculturalism." He maintains that liberals "cannot simply dictate anything to anyone just like they have been attempting to do over the recent decades" (Financial Times, 2019).

Such a discourse used by Russia also aims to portray the Western-based initiatives that spread liberal-democratic values as "hypocritical." From the Russian perspective, the weakening of liberalism in Europe and the US shows that Western powers selectively appropriate liberal norms according to their "double standards." This hypocrisy erodes Western agents' ability to create norms and set agendas, as they are no longer trusted to set new international standards that they will want others to adopt but will probably flaunt themselves (Bettiza & Lewis, 2020, pp. 8-9). If Russia could enforce such perceptions of hypocrisy, it could undermine the appeal of the same liberal norms and values that are used by Western actors to legitimize their approach towards the post-Soviet region. As examined below those perceptions also contribute to the appeal of counter-norms produced by Russia and to the integration process in the post-Soviet region around the Eurasian ideal.

Besides the crisis of liberal values in the West and its international repercussions, the failure of color revolutions in the CIS has become a second important factor leading to a decline in the EU's soft power in the region. In the early 2000s, these revolutionary changes were welcomed by the Western powers which considered the people throughout the region to be intrinsically aspired to the liberal-democratic values promoted by the West. According to this perspective, if the leaders of this or that country try to stifle this naturally progressive trend, they would be swept away by a surge of popular protest (Lukin, 2014, p. 46). Even though revolutionary movements supported by Western democracy assistance were successful to this end, the democratic promise of the color revolutions quickly stagnated and dissipated after the initial democratic breakthrough.

As Mitchell (2012, p. 116) suggests, there were significant elements of continuity in the domestic politics of Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan after the color revolutions, which were less ambiguous than any democratization trends. Georgia continued to be dominated by a single political party, while power was predominantly concentrated in the presidency. As it was before 2005, Ukraine continued to be divided into regional, linguistic and ethnic lines. The country became less pro-Russian and more liberalism-oriented but there was still political corruption and widespread influence of money in domestic politics

(Mitchell 2012, p. 140). In one year following the Tulip Revolution of 2005, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, the new President of Kyrgyzstan suggested that Western individualism does not find any resonance in the country. In 2009, the waning prospects of democratization in the post-Soviet region were even confirmed by the EU which expressed its “grave concern that the pace of reforms has slowed particularly in democratic reforms and human rights standards” (Kobayashi, 2017, p. 17).

While leading to disappointment in the West and the region, the failure of color revolutions exposed the fact that democratizing processes take time and necessitate the development of long-term and comprehensive strategies driving on deep contextual knowledge. This had not been taken seriously by the Western democracy promoters. As indicated by former local members of Western-funded democracy promotion programs in Central Asia, “the mind-sets and attitudes of their countries’ people are the main obstacles to meaningful democratization” (Omeličeva, 2015, pp. 139-140). In this respect, the Western contribution facilitated the replacement of the existing regimes and leaders with pro-Western ones. However, subsequent governments failed to meet the high-level expectations of color revolutions under the domestic conditions of the post-Soviet countries. This seemed to contribute to the success of Russian propaganda in the region, which portrayed Western-led democratization initiatives just as a plot aiming at subverting regimes and spreading Western geopolitical influence throughout the region (Omeličeva, 2015, p. 125).

The third significant factor leading to the decrease of the EU’s influence and soft power in the region is the weakening prospects for the enlargement, which was once portrayed as “the most successful foreign policy instrument” of the Union (EC, 2003). While Russia’s opposition and challenge to the EU enlargement proved to be formidable, the internal problems of the EU risking the future of European integration itself dramatically decreased the possibility of further enlargement. Such a move would likely enforce Euroscepticism and anti-EU movements in some member countries (Ultan & Ornek, 2015). The internal crisis of the EU leads not only to the weakening of its normative and structural power to shape its neighborhood but also a decrease in its willingness to allocate high amounts of material sources to contribute to liberal-democratic transformation in the region (Demeš, 2011).

It is important to note here that Russia has not behaved just as a “spoiler” by enjoying the EU’s economic and political retreat from the region and developing its bilateral relations with local states at the expense of European powers. Russia has also developed an alternative regional framework relying on the statist norms mentioned above and the related sovereign democracy ideal of Russia. This framework has been one of the most critical factors for the increase of Russian soft power in the region vis-à-vis the EU’s partnership initiatives drawing on political conditionality. Originally, sovereign democracy advocates that states have an immutable right to conduct their internal affairs without any external intervention in the name of contributing to democratization and ensuring human rights. The concept contrasts with managed democracy which is identified as “a political and economic regime imposed from abroad by force and deception” (Omeličeva, 2015, p. 176). In this respect, the sovereign democracy model proclaims that each country shall pursue a distinct path for developing its democratic system and political institutions

reflecting its own political culture and historical experiences (see Krastev, 2006; Orlov, 2008).

In recent years, some Russian pro-government experts have claimed that the Western democracy model could not fit all cultures and societies. They have maintained that some societies including the Russian one need a strong and centralized state to manage political transformation and economic development and to avoid conflict and disorder associated with democratic transformation (Noutcheva, 2018, p. 319). Russia's allies in the region view the Russian model of sovereign democracy as attractive since it subordinates democracy and human rights to the stability of government and societies. As Herd (2014, p. 183) suggests the model sees authoritarianism as the solution to instability rather than the cause of it. It is a strong motivation for regional states to join Russian-led "sovereignty-reinforcing" and "protective" integration schemes, which help them to legitimize their domestic political practices and resist normative pressures from Western liberal powers (Allison, 2018).

Some analysts suggest that the EAEU's normative framework is seen as attractive not only by regional governments for regime security reasons, but also by large segments of people who think that those norms could produce viable resolutions for the current era's political, economic, and social problems. According to a Russian conservative scholar, Sergei Karaganov, this situation provides soft power resources for Russia. He claims that "illiberal strongman democracy" prevails mostly in the rising states of the non-Western world, which has been always advocated by Putin since the beginning of his presidency in 2000 (quoted in Bettiza & Lewis, 2020). On the other side, Western-based scholars, Keating and Kaczmarek (2019) suggest that Russia increases its soft power at both the elite and popular level by defending "traditional" values and illiberal governance frameworks. Russia's soft power is contributed by Putin's image as a strong and decisive leader, as contrasted with weak bureaucratic and democratic political leaders and Russia's anti-American foreign policy that emphasizes sovereignty and pluralism. The Authors maintain that in each category, "Russia has global constituencies, beyond what it considers its post-Soviet sphere of influence, that view it as a leader in promoting these values" (Keating & Kaczmarek, 2019, 16).

### **Regional Responses to Russia's Strategy: The Rising Attractiveness of the Eurasian Integration Project**

In the literature, there is a strong tendency to portray the EAEU as an authoritarian club, in which members provide mutual support to each other's actions to consolidate their regimes and to suppress domestic opposition. According to this view, such motivations by political leaders outweigh the real economic benefits (see Rivera & Garashchuk, 2016, p. 102). However, some public surveys show that political and economic cooperation with Russia is also welcomed and supported by people of the post-Soviet region. A Gallup survey conducted in 2015 following the inauguration of the EAEU and Russia's annexation of Crimea revealed that regional approval of Russia's leadership was still very high: 93% in Tajikistan, 79% in Kyrgyzstan, 72% in Kazakhstan, 66% in Armenia, 62% in both Uzbekistan and Belarus (Gallup, 2015). A more recent public poll by the Wilson Center (2020) shows that Russia's image as a great power is predominantly favored

in Central Asia, while China comes second and the US takes third place. Accordingly, Central Asian people confirm closer economic relations first and foremost with Russia. A supermajority of Uzbek (89%), Kyrgyz (87%), and Kazakh respondents (81%) favored furthering economic cooperation with the Russian Federation. The report concludes that people's perception of Russia remains quite positive, maybe "even more than the diplomatic relations and elite opinions might indicate" (Wilson Center, 2020).

Omeliicheva's (2015) study of Central Asia claims that the non-liberal and statist regional governance model offered by Moscow has been a significant source of Russia's rising positive image in the region. She finds out that the Russian perspective of sovereign democracy resonates with the position of Central Asian leaders who have advocated their countries' right to follow their own paths to democracy and economic development. Omeliicheva's (2015) study also involves public opinion surveys carried out in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Those surveys reveal a parallel conviction in the public that "a strong state buttressed by a healthy economy" could better serve Central Asian people than "a weak state associated with liberal policies." Central Asian people welcome Russian-sponsored values such as strong leadership, which is viewed both as a source of domestic stability and as an imperative for dealing with political and economic crises. (Omeliicheva, 2015, pp. 123-130).

Among the Central Asian states, Kazakhstan has been the biggest supporter of the Eurasian integration idea; yet only in the economic realm and with the precondition of preserving national sovereignty. Kazakh sovereignty concerns have further grown after the Russian direct involvement in the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. President Nazarbayev stated that "as far as our independence is concerned, it is a constant. Kazakhstan will not surrender to anybody even an iota of its independence." He maintained that if the rules "are not respected then Kazakhstan has the complete right to end its membership in the Eurasian Economic Union" (quoted in Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2017, p. 11). On the other side, Kazakhstan maintains a political regime that could be best identified as a personalistic autocracy. Kazakhstan's constitution concentrates power highly in the presidency (Terzyan, 2020, p. 8). Eurasian regionalism appears much more appealing for a post-Soviet state with such an autocratic regime prioritizing national sovereignty. Still, Kazakhstan maintains some degree of cooperation with the European Union. However, this policy primarily aims to increase its bargaining power and foreign policy autonomy vis-à-vis Russia (Meister, 2018).

Kyrgyzstan maintains one of the weakest and most depressed economies in the post-Soviet region. The Kyrgyz economy heavily depends on foreign aid and remittances from its migrant workers living in Russia and Kazakhstan. (Sergi, 2018, p. 57; Mostafa & Mahmood, 2018, p. 166). In 2015, Kyrgyzstan's trade with the Union members accounted for around 42% of its total trade, including 26% with Russia and 16% with Kazakhstan. Under these conditions, gaining membership in the Union was arguably more pressing for Kyrgyzstan than for other regional countries (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2017, p. 9). On the other side, some reports suggest that the Kyrgyz economy was harmed after the accession to the Union mainly due to a high tariff system imposed on non-members including China. However, a public survey conducted in 2016 by the International Republican Institute (IRI) found that 65 percent of Kyrgyz people believed that the country was headed in the

right direction by joining the Russian-led Eurasian integration project (The Diplomat, 2016).

Uzbekistan has so far remained out of the EAEU, as a state which has been traditionally disturbed by Russia's hegemonic ambitions in Central Asia (Tolipov, 2019). After President Islam Karimov died in 2016, his successor Shavkat Mirziyoyev continued to follow a multi-vector foreign policy concerning Uzbek relations with Russia, China, and the West, which primarily aims at preserving national sovereignty and foreign policy autonomy (Marszewski, 2018). However, this does not mean that Uzbekistan discredits the Russian-sponsored normative framework and regional governance model. In Central Asia, the Uzbek government has long taken the lead to champion the view that political stability and national security take precedence above all other objectives and considerations like democratic transition. This view has come to be confirmed first by other Central Asian leaders and then by a majority of people in the region (Omelicheva, 2015, p. 124). Furthermore, Uzbekistan has recently signaled that it has been considering the potential economic benefits of joining the EAEU. In December 2020, Uzbekistan was accepted as an observer state at an online EAEU meeting during which Mirziyoyev touched upon "the organization's growing international reputation" and "widening cooperation geography." Mirziyoyev stated that EAEU member states are closely interconnected and deeply integrated concerning transportation and infrastructure and maintained that he wants to see an increased collaboration on these issues to bring down costs (The Diplomat, 2020).

At the May 2021 summit, Mirziyoyev emphasized the significant potential for the development of regional trade relations and Tashkent's willingness to remove trade barriers and take further steps for integration (Kalay, 2021). In 2020, the Center for Economic Research and Reforms in Uzbekistan carried out a public poll including 1,500 students, business owners, and government officials, which revealed that more than 70 percent of respondents have a favorable view towards EAEU membership (The Diplomat, 2020). Uzbekistan's eastern neighbor, Tajikistan has also started considering the advantages and disadvantages of its membership. Given the dependence of Tajikistan on the Uzbek economy and territory for trade and the political parallels between the two governments, it is reported that Tajikistan's membership hinges partly on Tashkent's decision and timeline for joining the EAEU: If Uzbekistan becomes a member "Tajikistan will have little choice but to follow" (The Diplomat, 2021).

In Eastern Europe, Belarus is a post-Soviet state which is highly dependent on Russia for energy, trade, and its economy. The country imports 80 percent of its energy needs including natural gas and oil from Russia. Moscow has provided subsidization on energy prices and some financial assistance in exchange for Minsk's support for Eurasian integration initiatives (Yesevi, 2014, p. 1991). Belarus maintains a truly autocratic and oppressive regime under Alexander Lukashenko's leadership, which created a moral dilemma for the EU in the past for inviting the country into the Eastern Partnership. The access of Minsk to this initiative created some high expectations in the EU for a reform process but soon it became clear that the Belarussian government was only interested in economic benefits from the partnership (Demeš, 2011, p. 13; Simionov, 2013, p. 122). At the same time, President Lukashenko has often driven a hard bargain with Russia in negotiations on the Eurasian integration process to secure the mechanisms to preserve



national sovereignty and especially to reach energy deals on more favorable terms (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2017, p. 8; Busygina & Filippov, 2020, p. 7).

Following the domestic crisis and the wave of anti-government protests in May 2020, it became particularly difficult to measure public opinion in Belarus. In late 2020, the Poland-based Center for Eastern Studies conducted a telephone survey with a sample of 1000 Belarussian respondents, which revealed that the positive attitude towards Lukhashenka remained around 41 percent, while 46 percent had a negative view. However, the situation does not seem to change the very positive image of Russia in Belarus, as 86 percent of respondents declared their positive perception of Russia. In addition, Putin himself received the support of 60 percent of Belarusians (Ioffe, 2021; OSW, 2021).

Armenia's accession to the EAEU has become possible after a quick foreign policy maneuver in late 2013. Following a private meeting with Putin on September 3, President Serzh Sargsyan turned away from signing an Association Agreement with the EU and announced Armenia's intention to join the Russian-led Customs Union and then the Eurasian Economic Union (Vasilyan, 2017, p. 33). Scholars view the main reason for this shift as Armenia's continuous dependency on Russian support due to its economic problems and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan (Vasilyan, 2017; Del Medico, 2014). To drive Armenia into the EAEU, Russia also applied some economic carrots, such as discounted energy prices and a financial loan offer (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2017, p. 9). Russia already enjoys a monopoly in the Armenian energy and transportation sector. On the other side, the EAEU membership creates advantages for Armenian migrant workers in Russia whose number exceeds one million (Turchyn & Ivasechko, 2020, p. 112; Felgenhauer, 2014).

Among those issues, the Karabakh conflict has been the most significant factor affecting the foreign policy and domestic politics of Armenia. The conflict has been often used to legitimize the restrictions on political liberalization and the centralization of power in the country. (Del Medico, 2014, pp. 7-8). The 2018 "Velvet Revolution" aroused optimistic expectations for a democratic transition in the country, which was led by Nikol Pashinyan who opposed the dominance of the so-called "Karabakh clan" in Armenian politics. Before the revolution, pro-Western opposition figures were also criticizing Armenia's decision to join the EAEU. After coming to power, however, the Pashinyan leadership quickly confirmed Armenia's commitment to Eurasian integration due to certain geopolitical and economic realities on the ground (Terzyan, 2020, p. 8; Kucera, 2019). Later in 2020, the renewed conflict in Karabakh triggered a domestic crisis that risked undoing the success of democratic development after the Velvet Revolution. This situation was confirmed by Freedom House (2021, p. 3) which decreased Armenia's democracy score for the first time since the revolution.

It seems that the Armenian people have also supported the country's orientation towards Eurasian integration. According to an IRI (2018) survey, 78 percent of Armenians believe that Armenia's joining the EAEU has been positive for their country. In addition, Gallup's (2017) international poll also put forward that 89 percent of Armenian people have a favorable view of President Putin. The 2020 Karabakh conflict led to the rise of a public sense of betrayal that Armenia's long-standing ally Russia wasn't providing enough support in the conflict. However, it is suggested that after Russia brokered a

ceasefire on November 10, providing the deployment of 2,000 Russian peacekeepers in the conflict area, Armenians came to view Russia again as a “savior” preventing further territorial losses and humanitarian costs (RFE/RL, 2020).

Since the 2000s, Azerbaijan has tried to preserve a neutral position in the competition between the European and Eurasian regionalisms (Valiyev, 2016). Baku maintains a high-level concern for its sovereignty and does not accept any intervention into domestic affairs by external actors. Having rich energy sources, Azerbaijan has been less dependent on the EU’s economic assistance and conditionality (Simionov, 2013). On the other side, the Eurasian integration initiatives have been viewed as an attempt to re-establish a new form of the Soviet Union (Bayramov, 2013, p. 14). Furthermore, Russia’s integration project runs contrary to Azerbaijan’s primary foreign policy objective of becoming an energy hub and a critical country for European energy security. Azerbaijan has been interested in increasing cooperation with the EU in several areas such as energy, transportation, trade, and visa liberalization. Yet, Baku has generally viewed the European Union more as a business partner and rejected implementing the EU-sponsored reforms on democratization (Turchyn & Ivasechko, 2020, p. 111).

Towards the mid-2010s, Azerbaijan began to rethink its approach towards Russia and the Eurasian integration idea in an atmosphere of deteriorating relations with the EU. The drop in global oil prices with adverse impacts on the economy and emerging anti-government protests have further increased authoritarian tendencies in Azerbaijan. The EU became increasingly critical of human rights issues, freedom of the media, and corruption in the country (Valiyev, 2016; Turchyn & Ivasechko, 2020). On the other side, the relationship between Azerbaijan and Russia has become much closer as the two states share a very similar political regime. Despite supporting Ukraine’s territorial integrity following the Crimean annexation of 2014, Azerbaijani officials came to endorse Russia’s narrative on the reasons for the color revolution in Ukraine. Some of them portrayed it as a “project” planned and funded by the West, which resulted in civil strife and anarchy in Ukraine and might be repeated in Azerbaijan itself. In recent years, Baku arrested a large number of opposition politicians and activists, while it closed down or harassed Western NGOs and institutions working for democracy promotion in Azerbaijan (de Waal, 2014). All those moves indicate that the Russian-sponsored normative framework and regional governance model find resonance in President Ilham Aliyev’s approach towards domestic politics in Azerbaijan.

In recent years, Azerbaijani leadership has played with pro-EAEU rhetoric to manage its relations with Russia. So far, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been used to justify Azerbaijan’s unwillingness to join the Russian-led Union as it includes Armenia as a full member. It is suggested that the Azerbaijani public could confirm EAEU membership if Moscow, in turn, promises to provide the return of occupied territories, thereby sacrificing partnership with the EU by virtue of retaking territory (Valiyev, 2016). In this respect, it is argued that the recent deal on the Karabakh conflict brokered by Russia which returned a considerable territory to Azerbaijan might change Baku’s strategic calculus toward the EAEU. Russia will probably attempt to use its peacekeeping military forces deployed on Azerbaijani soil as additional leverage on Baku in the way towards the eventual resolution of the conflict. In this respect, Azerbaijan could gain some political rewards in exchange

for joining the Eurasian integration (Shahbazov, 2021). However, Azerbaijan's accession to the EAEU still looks like a distant prospect, given the ongoing conflict with Armenia, Baku's view on Russian-led integration initiatives, and its economic relations with the EU.

There are three other neighbors of Russia located in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus which have generally followed pro-EU policies with the ultimate objective of gaining full membership; namely, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. In response to their policies, Russia has predominantly appealed to hard power tactics to coerce them to change their preference. Those tactics include playing with energy prices, imposing trade barriers, offering financial assistance as bribery, and manipulating their ethnic conflicts. After the Rose Revolution of 2003, Georgia's orientation towards the West with the objective of being a full member of the EU and NATO was responded to very harshly by Russia. Starting in 2005, Russia imposed an economic blockade against Tbilisi. Moscow banned the import of Georgian agricultural products and wine, while it sharply increased the price of Russian natural gas imported to the country (Lomia, 2020). The Kremlin also manipulated ethnic conflicts in the country and intervened in the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in August 2008. Following a five-day war with Georgia, Russia recognized these two breakaway regions as independent states (Matsaberidze, 2015).

Ukraine has faced similar aggressive moves by the Kremlin in response to its moves towards further integration with the EU. During 2013, when Yanukovich was negotiating Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU, Russia tried to persuade Ukraine to join the Eurasian Customs Union. Moscow posed strong political pressure on Kyiv and threatened to close the Russian market for Ukrainian products in order to dissuade it from signing the agreement with the EU. Besides, Russia also offered a \$15 billion package of loans, discounts on natural gas prices, and investments in Ukraine's industry as enticements for joining the Eurasian integration (Horemuz, 2015, p. 17; Plekhanov, 2016, p. 13). The Russian offer was very attractive from Yanukovich's perspective, as it did not involve any type of political conditionality. By taking the Russian offer, therefore, Yanukovich would have been free to win the next elections by whatever necessary means with Russian assistance (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2015, p. 87).

In November 2013, Yanukovich suspended the process of signing the agreement with the EU and reoriented towards the Eurasian integration. This decision soon prompted mass civil protests in Kyiv which led to the Euromaidan revolution of 2014. The new pro-western government established in Ukraine soon signed the Association Agreement with the EU (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2015, pp. 94-98; Diuk, 2014). In response to the regime change in Ukraine, Russia resorted to hard punitive measures including various economic sanctions, the annexation of Crimea, and military intervention in the civil war in eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin's harsh reaction to Ukraine underscored Russia's hegemonic inclinations. This in turn heightened the sensitivities of independence and sovereignty among other regional states including the EAEU members (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2017, p. 11).

Since the mid-2000s Moldova's orientation towards the EU has also led to political crises with Russia and some economic measures by Moscow such as trade restrictions on Moldovan wine and agricultural products. On the other side, the Transnistrian

ethnic conflict and the presence of the Russian military in the country under the label of peacekeepers have been often used as instruments to dissuade Chisinau from joining the EU and NATO (Todua, 2007; Kennedy, 2016). The 2014 Ukraine crisis seemed to deepen the existing ethnic frictions in Moldova. As the crisis developed into ethnic conflicts in eastern Ukraine, the pro-Russian political authorities of Transnistria and Gagauzia declared that Moldova's orientation toward the West and EU was contributing to the country's territorial fragmentation (Suveica, 2014). The annexation of Crimea also resulted in the formation of diverse viewpoints on foreign policy issues in the Moldovan political elite and public. The domestic survey conducted by the Institute for Public Policy of Moldova in November 2014 found that there was a significant reduction in support for EU membership, which fell to 44%, while 47% of Moldovans favored joining the Russian-led Customs Union (see Kennedy, 2016, pp. 524-527).

Later the revelation of the \$1 billion Moldovan bank fraud scandal contributed to a further decline in popularity of the EU ideal in Moldova. As the pro-EU coalition government failed to struggle against corruption, people seemed to have lost faith in the European dream. In March 2015, massive anti-government protests started in Chisinau which helped to strengthen pro-Russian political parties in Moldova (*ibid.*, pp. 525-526; Volovoj, 2017). The November 2016 presidential elections were won by Igor Dodon, who criticized the EU-Moldova Association Agreement signed two years previously. In April 2017, Moldova was granted an observer status in the EAEU. This development marked the Dodon leadership's re-orientation towards Russia (Euractiv, 2017a; 2017b). There was a parallel increase in the Russian leadership's popularity among the Moldovans. The Gallup (2017) poll on the images of global leaders put forward that 77% of Moldovan people had a favorable view of Russian President Putin.

Yet, the rise of the popularity of the EAEU in Dodon's early years at the office did not turn into a long-term trend shaping Moldovan orientation. The attractiveness of the EU idea soon began to increase for Moldovans. A public poll conducted in July 2018, showed that the popularity of the EU reached 46 percent, while the support for the EAEU dropped to 36 percent (IRI, 2018). The next presidential elections in 2020 led to the victory of Maia Sandu, a pro-European leader who had promised to fight against the ongoing corruption problem. Yet, Sandu faced strong parliamentary resistance to her rule, which resulted in a lengthy political and interinstitutional fight. According to a report by the Freedom House (2021), this might erode democratic protections in Moldova even more. The report underlines that there are still strong impediments to a stable and successful democratization process in the pro-EU regional states in the CIS such as high-level corruption, weak domestic institutions, autocratic political tendencies, and problems in ensuring the rule of law (Freedom House, 2021).

The examination of the different countries above shows that Russia resorts to similar hard power instruments and tactics against regional countries where the EU's influence is still strong. However, it is not always clear, whether the EU's influence in those states comes from its soft power based on the attractiveness of liberal-democratic values. The post-Soviet neighbors of the EU usually use their ties with Brussels to gain material benefits and to expand their freedom of action vis-à-vis Russia rather than to support their modernization or democratization process (Simionov, 2013, p. 125; Del Medico,

2014, p. 10). Such a strategy is implemented also by some EAEU members which follow a multi-vector foreign policy to ensure their independence. This fact indicates that a sort of transactional partnership model with the EU has become widespread throughout the region, which differs from the normative partnership model sought by Brussels since the 1990s.

### Conclusion

The analysis represented in this paper shows that Russia's regional integration initiatives in the post-Soviet area are supported by a mix of soft power and hard power tools. The Russian-sponsored normative framework and regional governance model are highly appreciated by political leaders and people in Central Asia. When we move our focus towards the Caucasus and Eastern Europe, we see that Russia relies more on hard power tactics such as playing with energy prices and manipulating ethnic conflicts against the pro-Western states. Due to the geography, the local states in these two regions maintain lesser degrees of economic interdependence with Russia and other post-Soviet states, while they enjoy more intense economic ties with Europe. This renders political and economic cooperation with the EU more attractive.

However, those regional states' approach towards the EU primarily aims at maximizing their material interest and foreign policy autonomy vis-à-vis Russia. In this respect, they seek political, economic, and security assistance from the West; but there is an ongoing strong resistance against democratic reforms promoted by the EU. In this respect, even the pro-Western governments in the CIS region stop short of fully embracing the idea of European regionalism. The EU's normative influence continues to wane in the region due to certain factors examined in this paper. This leads to the proliferation of transactional partnerships with the EU in the region which seems much more attractive to non-democratic governments. This problem seems to make relevance to contemporary discussions on the weakening of long-term institutional and value-based partnerships throughout the world in the age of rising authoritarianism, populism, and nationalism.

It is still questionable whether Russian-promoted norms and values are so influential and attractive beyond Central Asia. However, high-level approval rates of Russia and its political leadership among the people of countries like Armenia, Belarus, and Moldova could be interpreted as there being no serious opposition to the norms, values, and political ideas promoted by Russia. The public surveys conducted from 2015 to 2020 put forward positive public perspectives which contradict the image of Russia that the EU has sought to promote, i.e. a hegemonic power opposing democracy, modernization, and development in the region. Under these conditions, some regional governments have not found it very difficult to legitimize their pro-Russian policies or rapprochements towards Moscow and the Eurasian integration alternative.

There are some authoritarian states like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan which have not participated in the EAEU since they are not sure whether the economic benefits of joining the Union would outweigh the costs. On the other side, one cannot argue that those states do not sympathize with the normative framework advocated by the Eurasian integration project. In this respect, we can identify another group of regional states which hesitate to join the EAEU due to certain economic considerations but look for a

non-institutionalized partnership with Russia and other members in the organization to consolidate their rule in the domestic realm and the statist regional governance in the CIS region. Such a cooperation and partnership model could also contribute to the success of Russia's power political norm contestation strategy vis-à-vis the EU, which aims to block the expansion of Western political influence in the region.

This paper also put forward the advantages of Russia's power political strategy drawing on non-violent practices, such as norm contestation, institution building, and economic integration initiatives in post-Soviet Eurasia. Compared to military methods like alliance building and interventions into regional conflicts, the Eurasian integration process does not represent a serious challenge to the sovereignty of small regional states. For example, unlike the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which is a regional military alliance in the CIS region, the EAEU membership does not require concessions to harmonize foreign policy and security strategy. On the other side, Russia has seemed to be open to making concessions from its intention to build a supranational economic bloc limiting the sovereignty of smaller members for the sake of ensuring larger participation in the EAEU. In its current form, the EAEU brings some restrictions for the member states in their foreign economic relations but the Single Economic Space, in turn, provides some benefits for regional states that maintain a high-level interdependency with each other and Russia.

This paper examined how Russia has increased its political influence and soft power in the post-Soviet region vis-à-vis the EU by following a successful norm contestation strategy since the early 2000s. It is indispensable that Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 would have negative consequences concerning the future of Russia's soft power in the region. The appeal of Russia's regional leadership may decrease even in the countries which are Moscow's close regional allies. However, the intangible norms, values, and principles which have been promoted by that leadership for two decades could not be easily and quickly eliminated from the region by the impacts of the Ukraine war. The authoritarian and statist norms sponsored by Russia would continue to structure regional governance and cooperation in a way that favors Russia's strategic interests and undermines the EU's normative appeal and regional influence. This could help Russia to compensate for the negative effects of its military actions in the region to some extent in the contemporary era which is marked by the rise of authoritarianism and nationalism.

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