



The formation of the Eurasian Economic Union: How successful is the Russian regional hegemony?



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ABSTRACT

January 2015 witnessed an important step towards further integration in Eurasia, with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) coming into operation. It comprises three members of the former Eurasian Customs Union (CU), Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, plus Kyrgyzstan and Armenia.

Recent debates on Eurasian integration consider the EAEU to be a Russian hegemonic project in the region. However, the potential of this project is yet to be discovered. This article has pioneered in applying the neo-Gramscian approach to analysing the potential for the EAEU as a Russian counter-hegemonic initiative. The neo-Gramscian understanding of hegemony, which constitutes of four core elements, is reflected in the structure of the article: the institutional design, material capabilities (the capitalist system), security invulnerability (geopolitics) and cultural leadership.

The article concludes that Russian regional hegemony has not yet been formed, but has the potential to be completed. Hegemony has been consolidated domestically, and has started outward expansion through the EAEU as its institutional mechanism. However, to succeed with its hegemonic project, the Russian government should not simply copy the EU's institutional design but learn how to present the achievements of integration as successful efforts at creating a strong welfare system that favours key social groups in order to obtain social consent and take cultural leadership.

The novelty of the presentation of hegemony as an evolutionary process, which passes through initial, transitional and conclusive phases of its development, along with the recentness of the EAEU as a topic, could make this article a contribution to Eurasian integration studies.

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Introduction

In 2007, Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus declared their intention to create a customs union within the Eurasian Economic community – the Eurasian Customs Union (CU).

In contrast to the manifold previous attempts at integration in the post-Soviet space, this initiative happened to be a fast-moving project that managed to make sufficient practical steps, such as the introduction of the common customs tariff, the adoption of the Customs Code in 2010, and the elimination of border controls in 2011. January 2015 witnessed an important step towards further integration of the CU members, with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) coming into operation, with Kyrgyzstan and Armenia joining as new members.

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The actuality of Eurasian integration studies is dictated by the attention paid by politicians and academia to the Russian Federation's policy in the "Near Abroad", characterised as focused on achieving Russian regional hegemony (Saivez, Shevtsova, Tsygankov, Trenin, Van Herpen). The EAEU's significance as a case study for this article stems from questions about what caused the recent CU to succeed where its predecessors failed, and why now, but not before, the EAEU could become an efficient tool for recapturing and preserving Russian dominance in the region.

This article argues that the current historical moment could be favourable for the EAEU to form part of the Russian hegemonic project. The main research question pertains to how successful the EAEU is as a tool of Russian regional hegemony. This main topic implies the challenge of defining the notion of hegemony. It is suggested that most of the existing papers on Eurasian integration and on Russian foreign policy contain four basic analytical flaws. Firstly, hegemony is defined within foundational positivist traditions, where the multifaceted concept of hegemony is reduced to political, economic or military dominance. Secondly, the analysis is based on existing theories of European integration, which have been developed vis-à-vis European experience and therefore don't reflect Eurasian peculiarities. Thirdly, the role of social forces in achieving hegemony is neglected, and finally, these papers fail to consider competitive struggles between capitals, neither vertical capital-labour relations nor horizontal inter-capital rivalry (Apeldoorn, 2002).

The EAEU is an infant project, which puts limitations on practical research methods and makes it problematic to fully base the analysis on foundational ontology. However, existing theoretical shortcomings and scarce empirical evidence, which is reduced to the statistical data on the CU, could be overcome by referring to absolute historicism, which assumes a dialectical understanding of history, and the relationship between economic and socio-cultural factors when referring to Russian hegemony. Therefore, this article applies the neo-Gramscian concept of hegemony to the analysis of Eurasian integration. By placing the EAEU within a particular historic moment, "with the possibility of the recurrence of the old issues, which are perennial", it is possible to estimate its prospects for success (Morton, 2007, p. 30).

Section 1, which is fully devoted to a literature review and the theoretical aspects of the article, is followed by sections designed to reflect the practical application of the neo-Gramscian understanding of hegemony, which is constituted of four "essential parts" or elements: institutional design, material capabilities (capitalist system, economics), security invulnerability (geopolitics) and cultural leadership (Linklater, 2005).

Section 2 considers the material aspects of Russian hegemony in three sequential subtopics. The first implicitly defines Russian capitalism as the formation of a historic regional or global block that starts at the national level (Morton, 2007, p. 132). The nature of capitalism predetermines the configuration and transformation of social forces (Bieler, 2002; Gill, 2003), which is the starting point of the analysis. The second subtopic refers to the institutional composition of the hegemonic project, which is a "part of the dialectical complex of the 'national' and 'international'" (Morton, 2007, p. 79) when hegemony "moves outward"

after it is "consolidated domestically" (Cox, 1983, pp. 170–172). The third subtopic considers economic issues facing the EAEU to define the material potential and constraints of Eurasian integration.

Section 3 analyses the geopolitical challenges and ideological constraints facing the Russian hegemonic project, as the effectiveness of the EAEU depends on whether its underlying principles manage to extend beyond state policies "right into the conscious shaping of the balance among social forces within states and the emerging configuration of historic blocks" (Cox, 1987, pp. 214–125).

The main theoretical development of the article is to present the concept of hegemony as an evolutionary process, which passes through three phases: initial, transitional and conclusive. This presentation allows us to estimate hegemonic phases for each of the elements, which, combined via SWOT-analysis, drive us to the article's conclusion.

1. Theoretical aspects of Eurasian regionalism

1.1. The concept of hegemony and neo-imperialism in the studies of Eurasian integration

The contemporary relevance of regionalism in Eurasia is reflected by the large number of academic analyses on the topic, but these tend to approach the issue from an external perspective, "outside-in", neglecting to consider attitudes within Russian, Kazakh and Belorussian society, and the peculiarities of the region's self-positioning with regard to the rest of the world. Using the experience of the EU, they proclaim the Western democratic model as the best alternative to existing regimes. The EAEU is seen as an attempt by the Kremlin to develop a rival project to the EU's Eastern Partnership (Dreyer & Popescu, 2014). Interestingly, in some interpretations post-Soviet regionalism is seen in a new light. Roy Allison and Kathleen Collins argue post-Soviet regionalism's main objective is not to foster economic cooperation between states, but to establish "mutual protection" for autocratic regimes or "insulate" some countries from external democratic influences (Allison, 2008; Collins, 2009). Most often, Eurasian integration is analysed through the prism of Russian foreign policy strategy, with notions of empire and hegemony widely used to characterise it as expansionist, post-imperialist and even "de-colonialist" (Bugajski, 2004; Lucas, 2014; Van Herpen, 2014).

Many papers by Western academics undertake a purely realist approach, defining the EAEU as Russia's neo-imperial project. The notion of hegemony is flattened to the overt facets of power relations, such as territorial expansion and direct political-military and economic domination. These accounts suffer from Russo-phobia, suggesting that if Russia has not progressed to liberal democracy, it is potentially dangerous to Western countries, as antidemocratic regimes instinctively have imperialistic ambitions (Brzezinski, 1994). From this standpoint, the EAEU is seen as a manifestation of the "post-imperial syndrome", rooted in "annexationist Pan-Russianism", alongside pre-imperial Russian foreign policy (Van Herpen, 2014, p. 56).

Some Western authors who have managed to move beyond a purely realist approach deny the characterisation of Russia as "post-empire" or a "pre-imperial state". For instance, Jeffrey

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