



Regional integration in Central Asia: From knowing-that to knowing-how



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ABSTRACT

The paper examines regional integration in Central Asia in the context of two types of knowledge, that is, knowing-that and knowing-how. While knowing-that prioritizes representational (i.e. “talking”) practices of actors to explain region-building processes, knowing-how focuses on non-representational (i.e. “doing”) practices. The article demonstrates that the orthodox scholars, who deal with the region of Central Asia, mostly employ knowing-that to explain region-building processes. The article criticizes knowing-that, assuming that this type of knowledge limits our understanding with regard to how regions get their boundaries and symbolism in the era of globalization and standardization of sectoral activities. Thus the article develops and introduces an alternative knowing-how framework to better understand the region-building processes in Central Asia and beyond it.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine regional integration in Central Asia in the context of two types of knowledge, that is, knowing-that (i.e. representational practices in the form of “talking”) and knowing-how (i.e. non-representational practices in the form of “doing”). As I analyze the literature on regional integration in Central Asia, I conclude that an understanding of region-building processes in Central Asia has been limited mostly to the knowing-that knowledge. Knowing-that is characterized by “talking” practices of actors, that is, discourses and imaginations that actors employ to justify certain actions. The article assumes that these discourses and imaginations may have nothing in common with processes that are produced

by self-referential sectoral activities (i.e. “doing”), within which actors are engaged.

When speaking about “talking” practices of actors applied to the region of Central Asia, we have to mention about the five stans Central Asian spatial discourse (Azizov, 2015). This discourse informs official as well as academic practices relating to Central Asia; it determines the perception of Central Asia as a common integrative space. Such Central Asia, as an imaginative term, has social consequences, which provide significance to concepts such as geopolitics, balance of power and balance of threats. The five stans Central Asian discourse then conforms to an image, in which Russia, the U.S., and China are the central geopolitical players fighting for geopolitical supremacy and causing balance of powers and threats in the region (Azizov, 2015). While interpreting the regional processes in Central Asia within the five stans knowing-that knowledge, most scholars could not get rid of this five stans logic, hence they explain such processes only through the framework that the five stans discourse imposes on these scholars. Thus the five stans discourse limits our understanding with regard to how regions

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get their boundaries and symbolism in the era of globalization and standardization of sectoral activities.

Knowing-how, on the other hand, is less discursive and it targets at non-representational practices of actors, that is at “doing”, to see how actors engage bodily within the globalized world rather than “talk”. In so doing, it allows us to free our analysis from politicized imaginations and discourses. To see regional processes in a knowing-how light means to look into sectoral self-referential activities of actors, through which they communicate and remain connected to each other in the era of globalization and standardization. This era is characterized by the sectoral institutionalized standards such as the “Doing Business” rating of the World Bank, “the QS Higher Education System Strength Rankings”, “the Society Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication” (SWIFT); all these sectoral standards have already been institutionalized as the standard practices, the meaning and functioning of which less depend on actors’ political discourses and imaginations. It is these standard practices that give actors a geopolitics-free language of communication; actors socialize with each other, engage into practical, non-representational practices through these standards. In this regard, regional processes, that is, a process of becoming part of some common global practices, are not characterized by “some integration of parts into some social whole via common norms, but is used to refer to the specific connectivity of communication” within the standard practices (Kessler, 2012, 80). Self/Othering in terms of region-building is not the result of geopolitical and historical discourse/imaginations, but it is a process of practicing these standards and experiencing who is part of these standards and who is not.

To develop the idea set forth in this introduction in detail, the present paper is structured as follows. First, knowing-that and knowing-how are discussed, referring to scholarly works on regional integration in International Relations. This part shows that regions are imaginative spaces and these regions are produced and reproduced through the speech acts of elites and other region-builders. This is one perspective of reading regions, which may have nothing in common with the real practices of actors “on the ground”. Next, knowing-how is introduced as an alternative perspective to approach regions in the era of globalization and standardization of sectoral activities. This type of perspective reads region-building processes from the viewpoint of cross-border sectoral connections, which are non-representational self-referential practices of actors. This approach is then applied to the states of Central Asia, in particular, to Kazakhstan to understand how this country could be understood out of the five stans Central Asian spatial discourse. Final remarks conclude.

2. Regions and regionalism in a theoretical perspective: knowing-that and knowing-how

It is widely known that in social sciences we distinguish two types of knowledge, that is, knowing-that and knowing-how, through which region-building processes are explained (Hameiri, 2013; Pollack, 2001; Risse-Kappen, 1996). Knowing-that is characterized by representational practices, which prioritize discourses, imaginations and

simulations as well as speech acts that actors employ to justify certain interest-driven actions, i.e. geopolitics. Knowing-how, on the other hand, is less discursive and imaginative, and it targets at non-representational practices of actors to see how actors engage bodily with the globalized world rather than just “talk”.

Debates in social sciences and in IR are still going on in terms of which knowledge – knowing-that or knowing-how – is plausible and well explains a particular social phenomenon (Neumann, 2002). Roland asserts (Roland, 1958, 380) that the social world is not only characterized by representational knowledge (knowing-that), i.e. knowledge that is formed by thinking within one’s ‘cognitive repertoire’, that is, *a priori* knowledge. This world is also characterized by non-representational practices that actors experience daily (Pouliot, 2008); these practices go beyond the discursive/imaginative practices that take place in-between actors; these discursive/imaginative practices, however, might be different in terms of what actors really do in the world. In the real world, the actors do not passively fit into discourse/imaginations, but they could produce and reproduce new meanings by what they do daily in the framework of the global sectoral standards.

Within knowing-that, as it is assumed, actors imagine by referring to *a priori* knowledge, that is, a theoretical knowledge; they are assumed to act in a way that, for example, if we talk about Central Asia, the five stans discourse “says” to do; that is, the regional processes in Central Asia could possibly be explained within only the practices of the five stans, and any attempt to see, for example, Kazakhstan out of this five stans spatial arrangement is a myth (Tolipov, 2006). Consequently, within knowing-that we cannot understand a type of behavior that the stans have that does not conform to an imaginative five stans knowledge. Knowing-how helps us re-read the limitedness of knowing-that by focusing on a practice-oriented behavior of actors in different sectors, that is, what actors do rather than what they “say”. It is this practice-oriented behavior that produces and reproduces discourse/imaginations in the era of increased cross-border sectoral activities.

2.1. Knowing-that and regional processes

Knowing-that prioritizes discourses and imaginations over sectoral practices, that is, what actors actually do in explaining region-building processes (Agnew, 2013; Paasi, 1986, 1991, 2009; Ridanpää, 2015). Paasi (2009, 121) argues that “[r]egional identity, an idea at least implicitly indicating some cohesiveness or social integration in a region, has become a major buzzword.” To show this regional identity as the main element in region-building, Paasi points at a concept *institutionalization* (1986), i.e. regions “gain their boundaries, symbolism and institutions in the process of institutionalization” (2009, 121). Paasi shows how such an institutionalization of regions accentuates the power of regional elites to produce and reproduce regions through speech acts, historical narratives as well as discourses.

Paasi’s framework to region-building employs knowing-that in a sense that regions are the result of making in the course of narrativization by elites using their administrative power to construct reality through speech acts,

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