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The European Union as a Model of Regional Integration.  
Views from Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

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## **Abstract**

This paper purports to investigate the extent to which the European Union serves as a model of regional integration for the Eurasian Union, the brand-new project, initiated by the Russian Federation, Belarus and Kazakhstan. This new-fangled initiative will be partially based on numerous overlapping integration projects on the Post-soviet territory such as the Customs Union, the Union State, the Eurasian Economic Community and the Commonwealth of Independent States. However, as the political leaders of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan explicitly claim, they are going to draw heavily on the experience of the European Union both positive and negative. The paper aims to undertake an empirical exploration to reveal the perceptions of the EU as a model for regional integration held in these three countries and how these images contribute to the nascent identity and, by extension, foreign policy of the future organisation. Exploring this question can highlight the possible change of the perceptions and attitudes towards the EU in these countries. In particular, it is interesting to explore why Russia that used to adopt a critical attitude towards the EU started to perceive it as a possible model for its new integration project. Finally, this paper attempts to contribute to the Self/Other theoretical discussion of how the external perceptions can contribute to identity formation and consequently foreign policy formulation and implementation.

The analysis of the perceptions concentrates mainly on official discourse of the Russian and to a smaller extent Byelorussian and Kazakhstani decision-makers found in public declarations, press statements, articles and different documents, some of this material available only in Russian.

**Keywords:** the European Union, external perceptions, the Eurasian Union, Self/Other conceptual pair.

## **Introduction.**

The European Union's identity has been an object of fiery scholarly debates which led to a consensus that the European<sup>1</sup> identity is definitely a distinctive one. This distinctiveness has its roots in the EU's own self-representations<sup>2</sup> and its aspiration for a leadership status in such matters as promotion of democracy, human rights, climate change, humanitarian aid and peaceful conflict resolution. The distinctiveness thesis is also reflected in the academic discourse as it has generated such conceptualizations of the EU as a "normative" power (Manners, 2002), "civilian" power (Orbie, 2006), "norm-maker" (Björkdahl 2005), "ethical" power (Aggestam, 2008).

Although the attempts to conceptualize the EU's identity are highly commendable, it has been increasingly recognized that the analysis has tended to be self-reflexive and has not taken into account if the image that the EU has shaped of itself converges with its external image. That is a regrettable gap given the fact that this perspective could be a valuable contribution to the literature on the European identity and efficiency of its foreign policies<sup>3</sup>. This paper is a part of the PhD project that aims at partially breaching this gap by analyzing the images of the EU that prevail in Russian political discourse. The objective of this article is to see how the EU is viewed as a possible model for the Eurasian Union, initiated by Russian Federation, Belarus and Kazakhstan and how the images of the EU contribute to the formation of the nascent identity and, by extension, foreign policy of the future organisation. Although, the Eurasian Union will be based on the institutional resources provided by already existing organisations such as the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc) and the Customs Union of the Russian Federation, Belarus and Kazakhstan, the leaders of three countries explicitly claim that they are going to draw on the experience of the European Union both positive and negative. The perspective of studying the external images of the EU as a model of

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<sup>1</sup> Following Risse. (2004, 255) that the adjective "European" has been appropriated by the EU, the European and the EU identity are interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> Having analysed painstakingly the available data, Manners (2006) singles out nine values and principles that constitute the EU's identity: sustainable peace, social liberty, consensual democracy, human rights, supranational rule of law, equality, solidarity, sustainable development and good governance.

<sup>3</sup> The necessity to explore the external perceptions of the EU has generated various valuable researches Lucarelli and Fioramonti (2010), Chaban and Holland (2008) just to name a few. However, as it is a recent line of research, there are still enormous gaps to be breached.

regional integration to be followed or to be rejected is likely to have a feedback on the EU identity functioning as the crucial test for the EU as a distinctive entity.

The first part of the paper outlines the research rationale for studying the external images of the EU and then subjects the public declarations of the Russian policy-makers to scrutiny in order to highlight how the European integration is perceived and what are the lessons that the founding states draw having in mind the proposed creation of the Eurasian Union. The final part of the paper briefly summarizes Russian motivations for taking the EU as a model for the amplified integration on the Post-Soviet space.

### **The European identity formation: the neglected link.**

As it has already been mentioned, the studies on the EU identity have tended to be EU-centered focusing mainly on the European self-representations. This perspective is clearly deficient from the constructivist point of view. For example, Brubaker and Cooper (2000, 18) admit the limits of self-understanding as being “subjective and auto-referential term” that is unable to reflect others’ perceptions. It is crucial to capture understandings of other states as internal and external dimensions of identity are the flip sides of the same coin. While the internal aspect of identity encompasses self-conceptions as a unifying force the external dimension rests on the assumption that identities are constructed against the difference. Taking into account the necessity to incorporate the external perceptions, this paper accepts the Jepperson’s et al (1996, 59) definition of identity as “the images of individuality and distinctiveness (‘selfhood’) held and projected by an actor and formed (and modified over time) through relations with significant ‘others’”. Consequently, the identity implies “mutually constructed and evolving images of Self and the Other”<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> However, there are dissenting voices that view the identities as exogenous to interactions. Lebow (2008: emphasis in the original) for example, in his analysis of Greco-Roman literary heritage claims that identities “generally are formed *prior* to construction of ‘others’”. Wendt (1994) partially agrees with this point. Drawing on the symbolic interactionism he develops the concepts of corporate and social identities. While social identities indeed are developed through interaction with other states, the corporate identity, being intrinsic quality of the state, does not need the other. However, Wendt, in its definition of the corporate identity contradicts himself. As he (1994:385) puts it, the corporate identity includes such basic interests as physical security, ontological security, and recognition as an actor by others. These interests presuppose the presence of the others as the feeling of security or insecurity are generated by the images of the other actors and the state usually strives for others’ recognition.

The same holds true for the regional identity as it is seen “as part of the making of regions and used to maintain groupness and different exclusionary practices” (Yi, 238). Thus, the regional identity also requires the ontological presence of the Other<sup>5</sup>. The EU is not an exception as it needs the “audience” to display its identity and its identity is formed through the interaction with its others.

Literature on the Self/Other theorising highlights that “degrees of Otherness” vary. The poststructuralist thinking views the mere existence of the Other as threatening to the Selfhood, but simultaneously and paradoxically the Other also is ontologically significant. As Torfing (1999, 15) argues “identity is intrinsically linked to the construction of *social antagonism* which involves the exclusion of a threatening Otherness”. However, there are voices calling for more nuanced representations of the Self/Other relationship because the Other does not have to be necessarily radical and threatening and the enemy image lacks sufficient explanatory and analytical power. Connolly (1991, 64) while agreeing that “identity is dependent on its ability to define difference”, points out that there are various degrees of difference such as complementary identities, contending identities, negative identities and non-identities. Copeland (1997) offers a more elaborated categorization of Others, which can be a strong ally and ingroup, ally but outgroup, neutral but situationally driven and adversary with innately aggressive motives. Wendt goes even further arguing that the former enemy state can not only be seen in a more positive light, but even “as an extension of the Self”. (Wendt 1994, 386).

In the literature on the European identity formation Russia has been theorized as the significant Other (Neumann 1999) while in its turn Europe has been the reference point for the development of Russian identity (Neumann 1996). Despite the fact that relations between Russia and the EU cannot be defined in enemy terms anymore, they are still “conflictual rather than insufficiently cooperative” (Prozorov 2006) for various reasons.

Russia’s intentions to form the Eurasian Union taking the EU as a prototype might bring the relations between both actors into a new dimension. As it has been frequently pointed out one of the reasons that the relationships are bound to be tense between

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<sup>5</sup> Similarly to the constructivist discussions on identity Yi further points out, there are two views on the regional identity. The first sees the regional identity as primordial, that is it is already given and is based on such elements as nature, language, history, ethnicity, culture etc. The second strand of literature views identity as socially constructed.

Russia and the EU is their different nature. As the EU is a hybrid polity that combines supranational and intergovernmental elements and Russia is the traditional state whose foreign policy rests on the assumption of the sovereignty, both actors are bound to face multiple misunderstandings. So the question arises if the Russia's venture into the constructing an organization with supranational bodies similar to that of the EU will exert positive influence on the relations between the two. Does the Russian willingness to learn from the EU's experience testify to the change of its hostile and critical perceptions?

The other question involves the investigation of the implications that the emergence of the Eurasian Union as the new European Other has for the EU's identity. As the research shows, the EU seeks to promote interregional cooperation and its model of regional integration worldwide. When successful these practices help to consolidate the EU's identity as a distinctive international actor that is able to promote peace and prosperity (Antkiewicz and Momani, 2009), (Grugel, 2004), (Farrel, 2009). Now with the arrival of the prospective Eurasian Union the EU has an unexpected chance to test its identity in practice.

In this respect, the EU centered perspective should be abandoned in favour of the analysis conducted "from inside of the Other". Such an analytical lens can offer valuable hints for the Self's policy making (Hansen, 2006: 76) as it reveals the Other's perceptions of the EU and can provide valuable insights into the EU external images and thus influence its identity. The argument here is that the images that the EU project influence the Eurasian Union identity construction but at the same time they function as a "second" mirror and may affect the EU identity itself (Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010)<sup>6</sup>. Following the international relations literature suggestion that self perceptions and images of the other states are biased because actors tend to perceive themselves as inherently good and benevolent and they suppose that others also view them as such (Jervis 1976). However, the external perceptions can turn out to be different and it is crucial for an actor to be aware of its external images. Certainly, negative perceptions of the EU can undermine the EU's self-confidence making it feel as an 'invisible giant'

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<sup>6</sup> As Lucarelli (2009: 7) suggests: there are three components of the EU's development as a full-fledged actor: the gradual definition of a process of self-identification by the Europeans with the EU as their political referent (political identity), the EU's actual political performance at "home" and abroad, and the Others's view of the EU as a political actor.

hampering its policies and even disrupting the process of internal integration (Chaban and Holland 2008, 4) while positive perceptions and high-expectations of the actor exert positive influence on its self-perceptions as they satisfy its strive for recognition and enhance its self-esteem. For such a non-traditional actor under construction as the EU external images are even more valuable as they contribute to debates on its actorness and the alleged distinctiveness.

As Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus intend to draw on the best practices of the EU and avoid its errors the whole EU as an integration project will be positively or negatively evaluated and consequently the discourses of the founding states of the Eurasian Union as the Other will function as the “second” mirror for the EU self-conceptions. According to the discursive encounter model<sup>7</sup> (Hansen 2006) the Eurasian Union is also simultaneously constructed against the EU which functions as the Other for it.

### **Discourse analysis: brief methodological notes**

According to the constructivist and poststructuralist lines of research the perceptions, ideas and values are discursively represented. Following this premise and the fact that both the EU as well as the Eurasian projects are elite driven processes, this paper concentrates on the discourse analysis of the public declarations, documents are declarations of the high-ranking decision makers who are responsible for the foreign policy formulation. Because of the limits of space and taking into account that Russia is the most influential driver behind the Eurasian integration, the focus is on the Russian perceptions of the EU as a model of regional integration. However, as the Eurasian Union is based on the alleged equality of the three states and the decisions concerning the legal and institutional base of the proposed project have been agreed by all members, the Russian, Kazakhstani and Belorussian discourses on the EU are roughly similar. Moreover, the preliminary analysis of the material that included the joint conferences and well as the declarations and treaties that contained the agreed positions did not reveal substantial divergence of the perceptions of the EU among the three founding states. However, more scrupulous analysis of the contemplated difference in

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<sup>7</sup> Discursive encounter means that the analysis “contrasts the discourse of the Self with the Other’s ‘counter-construction’ of Self and Other” (Hansen, 2006, 76). In other words, the Self and the Other are mutually constituted.

perceptions that prevail in Russian, Kazakhstani and Belorussian discourses is still needed.

The temporal framing of the research embraces the period from January 2010 until August 2012. The timeframe is conditioned by the fact that although the idea of the Eurasian Union was voiced as long as 1994 by Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbayev, it was favorably forgotten until Russian Prime Minister sparked the interest to this project in his oft-cited article published in *Izvestia* followed by Lukashenko's and Nazarbayev's. These articles have generated resonant response and the discourse on the Eurasian Union became pervasive in the public sphere of these states.

The primary empirical data apart from the mentioned above include speeches, articles, documents and press conferences of the Russian president, Prime Minister, Foreign Affairs Minister, delegates of the State Duma and the Federation Council, Russian Permanent Representative to the EU as well as Russian representatives to the Eurasian Economic Commission. The paper included the official translation into English of the documents, in other cases the translation has been carried out by the author.

### **The Eurasian Union: a new integration project?**

The idea of the Eurasian Union belongs to the Kazakhstani president who proposed it in 1994. The proposal did not appeal neither to the newly-independent Post-Soviet countries nor to Russia as they preferred to pursue rather loose cooperation within the CIS. In 2000 Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan and Tajikistan established the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) with the objective to promote economic cooperation of the states while respecting their national sovereignty.

The Nazarbayev's concept of the Eurasian Union gained momentum when Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (2011g) revived this idea in his article in November 2011. The idea has been immediately supported by his Kazakhstani (Nazarbayev, 2011) and Belorussian (Lukashenko 2011) allies in their respective articles. Although Putin has been accused of manipulating the idea of the Eurasian Union as a part of the presidential campaign, the discourse on the Eurasian Union has become pervasive in the Russian political discourse and the creation of the union has been declared as one of the

priorities in Russian foreign policy. Actually, the words are confirmed by deeds as the integration processes between the three countries have accelerated at the vertiginous speed. Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan launched the Customs Union within the EurAsEC in 2010 that abolished trade barriers among the countries. The second stage towards the deeper integration was the establishment in January 2012 of the Common Economic Space that is responsible for ensuring “the effective functioning of the common market for goods, services, capital and labour; the formation of a coherent industrial, transport, energy and agricultural policy; further harmonisation of national legislations; strengthening cooperation in the monetary sphere and in area of economic security” (Medvedev, 2011). In February 2012 the Customs Union Commission was replaced by new Eurasian Economic Commission. The Eurasian Union, which is expected to come to life by 2015, is seen as the third and final step towards deeper integration of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

### **The EU as a model of regional integration: Russian perceptions.**

The Russian political discourse on the EU in general is self-contradictory and reveals certain duality (Secieru 2010) that reflects Russia’s vacillation between the necessity to cooperate and its perceptions of the EU as a political competitor. There is a similar ambivalence of Russian images of the EU as a possible model for the prospective Eurasian Union.

#### The EU as a heterogeneous group of countries.

The EU is seen as a heterogeneous group of states which achieved enormous success in its integration despite the fact that the European countries lacked any basis that could be propitious for integration such as common culture, language or any previous integration experience. That is according to Kim and Schmitter (2005) is one of the lessons that could be drawn from the European project that the regions have to be “created politically out of preexisting “raw material””. However, Putin (2011d) seems to disagree with that claiming that:

“Things are easier for us than, say, for integration in Europe as we share a past, and possess common transport, energy, communications and other infrastructures. We have a huge, deeply rooted cooperation. European countries have never had anything like it, while we inherited it from the Soviet national economy. We speak one common language, too. We

don't need translation into 27 languages – which is more of an economic factor than a cultural one.... Our colleagues have made tremendous headway, and we should study their experience and avoid their mistakes. We can do it perfectly well”.

The discourse that the conditions for the Eurasian integration are much more auspicious than those of the EU is quite repetitive and the Russian politicians frequently refer to their own links and shared experience to help them forge the Eurasian Union regional identity and to legitimize the regionalism to some extent. The statements that the EU is linked by some previous experience are extremely rare in Russian political discourse and interestingly, they appear to offset the accusations that Russia aims at restoring the Soviet Union. As the minister of the newly formed Eurasian Commission Valovaya (2012) says it is a usual practice that new regional projects draw on the previous integration experiences, even the EU has such experience as the founding EU six were the components of the Carolingian Empire. In her opinion this justifies that they also take advantage of the previous experience from the Soviet Union, the Russian Empire, the Golden Horde.

Putin who is known as an opponent of the disintegration of the Soviet Union which he characterized as “the greatest catastrophe of the past” now is facing a difficult task of rejecting the possibility of the reestablishing of the Soviet Union. One of the main methods to deny the imperial ambitions he resorts to is drawing parallels with the EU:

“We see what's going on in Europe: European integration has reached levels unheard of even in the Soviet Union. As you are probably aware, the number of mandatory decisions adopted by the European Parliament is greater than the number of binding decisions that were ever adopted by the USSR Supreme Soviet for the Soviet republics. Now they've started talking about a single government in the true sense of the word, and a single inter-currency regulator. These plans generate no objections, and no one talks about imperial ambitions” (Putin 2011d)

This lack of the homogeneity and common basis among Europeans is further undermined by the enlargement of the European Union caused by the political decision to absorb the states of the former communist bloc that did not fulfill the membership criteria. As the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov (2011a) explains:

“when the USSR disintegrated, the European Union sought urgently to fill the geopolitical vacuum.... Such geopolitical ambitions took precedence over the principles that until then had been applied in admitting new members to the EU

– namely, the economic and social readiness of an applicant state, the condition of its legal and judicial systems, a potential candidate having no territorial disputes and the availability of treaties with all neighbors on the protection of borders... As a result, the European Union as now constituted is a very heterogeneous grouping.”

This is one of the main mistakes Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus want to avoid following the European experiences. However, it is arguable if they will be able to do it, because their economies differ drastically and secondly, the Eurasian Union is not established yet and they founding members already announce that they are opened to admit new member states, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Ukraine.

### The EU as an economic power.

The attention of the architects of the Eurasian Union has mainly focused on the economic dimension of the European integration. That is completely justifiable as the pragmatic economic interests of the three states are the main driving force for the creation of the Eurasian Union and Russian politicians explicitly claim that the integration is purely economical and that it excludes the political element (Valovaya 2012)

The EU has been chosen as a model for the economic integration as it is “a powerful market with a strong supranational structure” (Lavrov 2011a) that has been able to achieve an unprecedented economic growth and to maintain the sustainability and competitiveness of its economy on the global stage. The EU is seen as able to serve as an example for the economies of the former Soviet counties which are “dysfunctional and uncompetitive because they had developed as part of the Soviet central planning system, in isolation from the global economy” Putin 2011(e). As he goes on Putin (2011b) “The main thing we expect from the integration of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan is further rapprochement between the countries, the strengthening of their economic potential and improved living standards for their citizens. I am convinced that this powerful new integration project could dramatically change the geopolitical configuration of the Eurasian space and promote unification processes in all the CIS countries.” Those objectives are feasible through the integration and that’s why Russian politicians are willing to learn from the European experience to transfer its best practices. Medvedev (2010a) describes the advantages of regional integration as

follows: “We all see when we go to Europe, what benefits they have gained from their economic integration. Yes, they do have their problems too, of course, and different countries there have different economic development levels, but at least when problems do arise, which is the sad reality in economic life, they can work together to solve them”

However, the external images of the EU are not devoid of negative evaluations. When talking about the EU Russian politicians mention that the EU faces daunting problems as the aggravating crisis has brought to the fore such problems as the sovereign debt crisis, the decline of economic growth, “North-South fault lines” as well as the support for the “fringe parties, which at times parade dangerous ultranationalist and even racist slogans”. Lavrov (2012a). All that according to the Permanent Representative of Russia to the EU has severely undermined “the EU self-image as an oasis of stability and prosperity, and now it is increasingly being viewed by outsiders – at least temporarily – as an area of economic turbulence”.

The main cause of the problem is rooted in the heterogeneity of the EU which is aggravated by the EU’s decision about admitting as members the states of the former communist bloc even in violation of the principle of the economic pragmatism (Valovaya, 2012). Russian claim that this is the main error they should avoid when expanding. As the then President Medvedev (2011) puts it:

“We can avoid such problems in our integration. First, we are aware of what we are doing and know exactly who is becoming part of this Eurasian Economic Union and part of the economic space we are building. This is not some collection of disparate countries, whether the countries using the euro as a currency or the 27 EU members, but for the time being is a grouping of three countries, three countries that share a common history and past what’s more, and are developing along similar lines because we are all in the process of forming a new economy... I do not want to say too much about the European Union, but in some respects they took on board unknown quantities. We are not in this situation. I am therefore confident that we will build a solid, effective and dynamically developing economic union”.

However, they seem to conclude that the EU will manage to overcome the crisis and even go out of the economic turbulence as more united. As Lavrov (2012a) sees it:

“Nevertheless Russia remains confident that EU member-states will ultimately be able to overcome current calamities and possibly emerge even more integrated than before. The European project has been known to

thrive on crises. The current one may be no exception. Over the past two years the EU has undertaken significant steps to reinforce macroeconomic governance, reinvigorate the Stability and Growth Pact, upgrade financial firewalls and oversee financial markets. The Commission has received unprecedented supervisory powers. A banking union appears to be underway and a full-scale fiscal union is slowly coming within reach”.

The Russian perceptions of the declining economic influence of the EU prompt it to seek diversification of its trading links. The Russian public space has recently seen the emergence of a new discourse on the Asia-Pacific region that is crucial for the socio-economic development of Russia (Medvedev 2012a). As Medvedev argues Russia, acting jointly with Kazakhstan and Belarus could “pave the way to a fundamentally new form of APEC integration and help expand the Asia-Pacific market to the whole of the Eurasian continent”.

However, Russia looking eastward does not forget about the EU, its “unavoidable partner” (Gomart 2010) with which it is linked through the extensive trade relations. In fact, the current Russian President nurtures the ambitious plan of creating a harmonised economic community stretching from Lisbon to the Pacific Ocean (Putin 2011a). This should be achieved through the cooperation between the Common Economic Space and lately by the Eurasian Union and the European Union which could lead to “a common continental market worth trillions of euros”. He is quite optimistic about the prospects of this far-reaching plan and he engages in identity-building practices. He (Putin 2011d) assumes that European partners “too, believe that Europe does not have a sustainable future without Russia. Europe is not just a geographical term. It is also a cultural notion. We share many values with Europe, many of which are based primarily on Christian values”.

#### The EU's institutions.

The original Eurasian Union proposed by Nazarbayev was based on the principles of equality, non-interference and state sovereignty. However, having analysed the experience of the European Union the leaders of Russia Belarus and Kazakhstan have come to an agreement that regional integration requires supranational institutions. Such a consensus resulted in the creation of the Eurasian Economic Commission that takes the European Commission as a prototype. The founding states cherish hopes that the

Commission will work as the “fourth integration force”. The Eurasian Economic Commission has replaced the Customs Commission, the main difference between the two is that the latter did not have its own ministers but the representatives from the member states. The Eurasian ministers are nominated by the states, however, similarly to the European Commission they are expected to act as supranational actors and not to present the national interests<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, the Eurasian Economic Commissions “decision-making mechanisms completely exclude the possibility of any one country dominating over another. This is a body in which all are equal” (Medvedev, 2011).

The next supranational body to be created is the Eurasian parliament that will possess legislative powers similar to that of the European Parliament. The necessity of such an institution is conditioned by the fact, that up to the moment the Eurasian Union is the elite driven process, and as the Chairman of the State Duma explains, the economic integration is impossible without the consent of the wider public and the democratically elected Parliament could play the role in the legitimizing of the Eurasian Union. (Naryshkin, 2012).

#### The EU as a promoter of human rights and democracy.

The EU is an entity that is based on values. On the other hand, human rights and democracy have been the values that generated more controversy between the EU and Russia. It is not surprising as the states that constitute the nucleus of the Eurasian Union based purely on economic reasoning, avoid commenting the normative dimension of the EU in positive light. In fact, the discourse on such values as democracy and the protection of human rights is very rare and appears in very general statements and as such, does not form the constitutive part of the nascent identity of the Eurasian Union.

On the other side, one of the main targets of the Eurasian Union is to reestablish the Russian influence over the Central Asian States and the appeal to such values may repeal those states (Leonova 2012: 33). On the other hand, the nature of the political systems of the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan and Belarus according to Kubicek (2009) may impede the Eurasian integration as the non-democratic states usually shun

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<sup>8</sup> However, the Eurasian Commission is just an emerging organisation and if it manages to live up to its expectations is still unclear.

the regional structures. As Kim and Schmitter show, the experience of the EU testifies that integrating countries should be democratic. This cannot be said about Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, however, that would provide an interesting topic of discussion if the Eurasian Union when completed, will exert a positive influence on the domestic structures of the countries. As Putin (2011e) suggests:

“I can also tell you that political systems change as well. They simply have to adjust to new challenges and new realities in every country. The methods used in the past few decades are no longer effective for running a country given society’s new information openness.... Political systems will be changing in one way or another. Moreover, the economy will also prompt political changes. I hope that this will happen through evolution, that is, smoothly and gradually, through agreement between those in authority and the people. I believe that the integration we are discussing will contribute to positive changes”

#### The EU’s influence on the post-soviet space.

First of all, Russian sudden interest to the Eurasian Union can be triggered by its perceptions of the EU as a rival on the Post-Soviet Space. The EU, despite its diminishing influence is still seen as the magnet for a number of countries. The Road Map on the Common Space and External Security aims to coordinate the relations between both actors in the common neighbourhood stipulating that:

“ the EU and Russia recognize that processes of regional cooperation and integration in which they participate and which are based on the sovereign decisions of States play an important role in strengthening security and stability. They agree to actively promote them *in a mutually beneficial manner*, through close result-oriented EU-Russia collaboration and dialogue, thereby contributing effectively to creating a greater Europe without dividing lines and based on common values” (2005, emphasis added)

Russian decision-makers publicly claim that in accordance with the road they “agree to take into account and respect the interests of the EU in the CIS space and hope to cooperate with them to foster integration”(Lavrov, 2010) while they often complain that the EU infringes on the Russian interests in the Post-Soviet Space. One of the examples that they refer to is the Eastern Partnership which is seen as non-transparent and inherently anti-Russian venture (Haukkala, 2009). Another more recent example is the imposition of the sanctions on Belarus as they “create artificial barriers in trade and unjustified obstacles to the economic interaction of business entities in the territory of

the Customs Union/Common Economic Space, and infringe upon the legitimate economic security interests of the states, which may cause damage to productive and mutually beneficial cooperation as well as to the integration processes on the Eurasian continent” (Putin 2012).

The EU’s “gravitational pull in the neighbourhood” (Secrieru 2010) arouses Russian irritation and bewilderment. Kosachev, chairman of the foreign affairs committee states that “the situation is absurd when post-Soviet states enjoy more benefits from cooperating with Russia and still they want to enter into the straitjacket of European institutions and to fall under the diktat of Brussels.” (Popescu 2006). More recently, Lavrov (2011) in his speech remarked that “from some European capitals we hear ideologized statements that Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and a number of other countries must “decide” with whom they want to be - with Europe or with Russia. This is a real provocation; such an approach should be abandoned”.

The EU influence and sometimes obviously confrontational stance compels Russia to change its tactics and copy the most efficient EU instruments. For example the Russian Foreign Deputy Minister’s way of defining of one of the main priorities as “developing good relations with our immediate neighbours and making those neighbours prosperous and stable” reminds very much of the EU’s rhetoric. In continuation he announces that these principles do not refer exclusively to the countries of the existing customs union but also to the other countries from the commonwealth if they join the organisation (Karasin, 2012).

The desire to imitate the EU is sometimes expressed more overtly: “For a number of countries the main motivation to join the European Union was the desire to become part of a community of more highly developed economies. We can offer the same incentive to our partners, saying to them, reform your economies and develop, and we are ready to build a new economic union together with you” Medvedev (2010a). Russian priority of becoming the economic magnet paralleled by its efforts to develop its soft power in the neighborhood suggests that Russia intends to present itself as a “benign power in

the 'near abroad''<sup>9</sup> (Secrieru 2010, 10). And that Russia has recently multiplied its efforts to build the new integration project when the EU is losing its appeal because of its problems may not be a mere coincidence.

### **Why does Russia do it? In lieu of conclusion.**

The EU has been engaged in promoting its model around the world thus enhancing its international role and identity by provoking the qualitative shift in international relations from more traditional state-to-state interactions to interregional cooperation (Farrel, 2009: 1165). While the EU has taken pains to transfer its practices to other parts of the world, the Eurasian Union partially modeled on the EU comes unexpectedly and without any effort from the European part. Of course the Eurasian Union has not come into existence yet, however, Russian political discourse already abounds in comparisons between it and the EU as the proposed model. While the Russian politicians jointly with their Kazakhstani and Belorussian counterparts subsume the EU to scrutiny to be able to use the European experience for the construction of the Eurasian Union, such an exercise serves as the "mirror" although only "partially comfortable" for the EU. As the paper has pointed out, Russian external perceptions highlight both lessons as well as the mistakes that are to be taken account in when constructing the new regional organisation.

The analysis has revealed that although Russian politicians acknowledge the merits of the European integration, they still remain critical of the EU. So what are the motivations behind the Russian willingness to refer to the European experience for the construction of the Eurasian Union?

First of all, Russia finds it difficult to compete as a single actor on the world stage. As Chizhov (2011) says "we consider that in a polycentric world an effective international architecture can only be created if it rests on solid regional "building blocks"..... It is with these considerations in mind that we regard integration unions that are emerging within the CIS space, including the Customs Union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. The same assumption is valid with regard to the forthcoming Single

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<sup>9</sup> There is some success as Kyrgystan and Tajikistan have already voiced their interest in joining the Eurasian Union and Ukrainian President Yanukovich (2012) has recently said that is "doomed" to cooperate with Eurasian Union and expressed his dissatisfaction that the EU is adopting a mentoring note.

Economic Space to be launched on 1 January 2012 with a further perspective of forming the Eurasian Union". In this sense the EU is seen as "the natural territorial gateway to gain access to the flows of globalization" (Gomart, 2010).

Secondly, Russia sees the participation in the regional block as able to strengthen Russian bargaining position vis-à-vis the EU which is seen as the imposing power that "attempts to project the EU legislation changes onto third countries, including Russia" (Lavrov 2012). Russian, as well as Kazakhstani and Belorussian politicians believe that joining forces in the regional organisation will permit them to stand on equal footing with the EU.

Thirdly, Russia has to compete with the EU, the USA and China and their projects that each of the powers promotes in the Post-Soviet Space. Taking the Central Asia as an example, China dominates the Shanghai Treaty Organisation, the USA proposes Greater Central Asia project, while the EU adopted "the EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership" which includes political, economic, cultural and social dimensions (Esteban and de Pedro, 2009). The Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Community lacks sufficient resources to bring closer the post soviet states, so Russia launches the Eurasian Union, basing it on the best practices of the European Union believing that this approach will help it to dissipate the suspicions of Russian intentions.

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