

EURASIAN UNION AND INSTITUTIONAL MIMICRY

ALIAKSEI KAZHARSKI

Abstract: The paper discusses the ongoing institutionalization of Eurasian integration and the potential of examining it from neo-institutionalist conceptual perspectives. The role of the EU as a global emulation model for projects of regional integration is explained and causal mechanisms of global institutional diffusion are given an expose. It is suggested that considerations of ceremonial mimicry, rather than actual lesson-drawing and substantive inter-regional learning, present a more viable explanation for partial institutional isomorphisms between European and Eurasian integration.

Keywords: Eurasian Integration, European Union, Regions, Regionalism, Diffusion, Mimicry.

ЕЎРАЗІЙСКИ ЗВЯЗ І ІНСТЫТУЦЫЯНАЛЬНАЯ МІМІКРЫЯ

Анотацыя: Артыкул разглядае сучасныя працэсы інстытуцыяналізацыі еўразійскай інтэграцыі і патэнцыял іх аналізу з гледзішча канцэптuallyнай перспектывы “новага інстытуцыяналізму”. Закранутая роля Еўрапейскага Звязу як глабальнага прататыпу для праектаў рэгіянальных інтэграцый. Дадзены кароткі агляд каўзальных механізмаў інстытуцыянальнай дыфузіі. Аўтар высювае гіпотэзу, паводле якой частковы інстытуцыянальны ізамарфізм паміж праектамі еўрапейскай ды еўразійскай інтэграцыі можа быць больш паспяхова патлумачаны праз канцэпт “цырыманіяльнай мімікрыі,” чым праз сапраўдны абмен досведам на інтра-рэгіянальным узроўні.

Ключавыя словы: еўразійская інтэграцыя, Еўрапейскі Звяз, рэгіёны, рэгіяналізм, дыфузія, мімікрыя.

The Eurasian Union serves as a cumulative term for a multiphase project of comprehensive regional integration. The existing Customs Union and the Common Economic Space of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus are represented as the current stage of its implementation.

Notably, the EaU institutional architects modeled their visions of the Eurasian Union on ideas and institutional models originating in European integration. The already existing institutional structure includes a Eurasian Economic Commission which mirrors the supranational European Commission and a Court of the Eurasian Economic Community that serves as a dispute resolution mechanism analogous to the European Court of Justice.

Russian top officials who have been major champions of institutionalizing Eurasian integration have also engaged in extensive comparisons between European and Eurasian versions of regional integration.

Certainly, observing previous attempts of post-Soviet integration provides enough reasons for skepticism. Typically, integration initiatives in the region did little more than contribute to increasing the “alphabet soup” of loose, non-binding regimes and have earned themselves ironic nicknames of “declarative integration” or “virtual” (Allison, 2008) and “ephemeral” (Wirminghaus, 2012) regionalism.

I propose a specific perspective on Eurasian integration, while subscribing to the view that the goals of directly emulating the EU are not realistic and we should not take them at face value. Nevertheless, the signs of mimicking call for a theoretically informed explanation.

My explanatory strategy places the Eurasian mimicry in the broader context of global institutional diffusion (see Meyer and Strang, 2009). It has been observed that similar institutional forms and ideologies have been spreading across different cultures and societies. This process has also influenced regional organizations and institutionalization of regional cooperation. Not only regionalism as a distinct way of organizing political and economic life has been proliferating in the modern “world of regions” (Katzenstein, 2005), but models for institutionalizing it have also been spreading between different regional entities. We can, therefore, speak of a global *diffusion* of regionalism.

A number of studies have observed a trend towards a global diffusion of European institutional forms. Some studies list a variety of causal mechanism that can serve to account for it. These mechanisms can be grouped as pertaining either to direct influence exerted by the EU (via its tools of conditionality and socialization) or indirect influence that manifests itself in more spontaneous efforts at lesson-drawing and mimicry undertaken by other regional organizations (Börzel and Risse, 2009).

Also, there is a tendency on the part of the EU to promote its blueprint of regionalism through fostering inter-regional cooperation. Other instances

can be described as more spontaneous emulation attempts. Notably, regional groupings, like the ASEAN, which had previously been known for consciously shunning regional institutionalization, have come closer towards emulating it (Jetschke, 2010).

What students of comparative regionalism have also noticed is that when regional institutions are being transferred from one region to another, they do not necessarily retain the same functions. Regions are simply too different in their integration objectives, preferences, and capacities in order for institutional solutions to be exchanged between them. Nevertheless, the borrowing of blueprints occurs even if their functions do not coincide. This suggests that importing institutional forms may have more than the instrumental logic of lesson-drawing to it. In many cases, considerations of functional relevance may be complemented or sometimes even supplemented by considerations of prestige and international legitimacy that regional organizations gain from interiorizing certain institutional forms.

The existing analysis is not resolved about a single causal logic of diffusion, suggesting that there may be many mechanisms behind it at the same time (Börzel, 2011). Institutional emulations can occur as *lesson-drawing* or as *mimicry*. Plainly speaking, regional organizations can imitate each other's way of doing things either in the hope for better results or because it will make them look better. Institutional borrowing can thus be pursued with considerations of international prestige and legitimacy rather than local efficiency and functional relevance.

The question is, then, which type of emulations are we likely to be dealing with in the case of Eurasian integration. The introduction suggested that the initial exceedingly ambitious goals of repeating the experience of European integration within a group of post-Soviet countries are not realistic. Analysts agree on a number of clearly identifiable regional differences that discourage an optimistic prognosis. Firstly, as opposed to the original European Communities, there are gross economic and political disproportions between the participants of Eurasian integration with Russia as the obvious behemoth. Secondly, participants of Eurasian integration share a specific governance culture that essentially differs from the governance culture of core Western European countries in lacking a transparent and well-functioning bureaucracy. Without comprehensive institutional reform that would secure consistent adherence to rule-based behavior efficient functioning of autonomous supranational institutions and domestic implementation of supranational decisions is unviable. Thirdly, current and potential participants of Eurasian integration are personalist autocracies or – at best – unstable democracies. Non-democratic nation-states preclude any development of democratic supranationalism à la

européen. Furthermore – also as the history of post-Soviet integration has demonstrated – authoritarian elites are not prone to share their power by engaging in real delegations of sovereignty.

Therefore, there are good reasons to predict that Eurasian integration will imitate European integration predominantly as a matter of mimicry and not as a matter of actual lesson-drawing. Resemblance in institutional structure and ideology will be more ceremonial than substantial. Even if occasional lessons are drawn from the EU experience, this will not play a key role in shaping institutionalizations of Eurasian regional integration.

Bibliography

1. Allison, Roy (2008). “Virtual Regionalism, Regional Structures And Regime Security In Central Asia,” *Central Asian Survey*, 27(2): 185-202.

2. Börzel, T. A. (2011). Comparative Regionalism: A New Research Agenda, KFG Working Paper Series, No. 28, August 2011, Kolleg-Forschergruppe (KFG) “The Transformative Power of Europe”, Freie Universität Berlin, URL: http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/kfgeu/kfgwp/wpseries/WorkingPaperKFG_28.pdf

3. Börzel, T. A., and Risse, T. (2009). Diffusing (Inter-) Regionalism: The EU as a Model of Regional Integration, KFG Working Paper Series, No. 7, September 2009, Kolleg-Forschergruppe (KFG) “The Transformative Power of Europe”. Free University Berlin.

4. Jetschke, A. (2010). Do Regional Organizations Travel? European Integration, Diffusion and the Case of ASEAN, KFG Working Paper Series, No. 17, October 2010, Kolleg-Forschergruppe (KFG) “The Transformative Power of Europe”, Freie Universität Berlin.

5. Katzenstein, Peter J.. A (2005). *World of regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

6. Meyer, John W., and Strang, David (2009). “Institutional conditions for diffusion,” in Meyer, John W., and Georg Krücken, *World Society: the Writings of John W. Meyer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Print.

7. Wirminghaus, Niklas (2012). “Ephemeral Regionalism: the Proliferation of (Failed) Regional Integration Initiatives in Post-Soviet Eurasia,” in Börzel, Tanja A., *Roads to Regionalism: Genesis, Design, and Effects of Regional Organizations*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.