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Integration Processes within the Eurasian Economic Union: Kazakhstan's Narratives

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Abstract: Integration processes in the Eurasian space are ambiguously assessed both by officials and an expert community of the member countries. Thus, there is still a discussion in Kazakhstan and various narratives are being formed concerning the expediency of the country's presence in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the advantages and challenges associated with this participation. The article deals with the main narratives that are presenting in Kazakhstan and describing the integration processes within the EAEU – official and expert (both critical about the EAEU and supporting Eurasian integration). The analysis conducted in the article is based on the understanding of the narrative as a “statement-result”, defined by its structure (coherence between key concepts). The article shows that all narratives about the EAEU, present in the Kazakhstani discourse, have a similar structure, formed by the concepts of “independence”, “integration”, “politics” and “economics”. The differences between the narratives are determined by the emphasis on either the “independence-politics” or “integration-economics” constellations (linkages), and the proposed format of regionalization of Kazakhstan within Central Asia or Eurasia.

Keywords: Eurasian Economic Union, Kazakhstan, weak state, discursive space, narratives, structure of discourse

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I. Introduction

Despite the fact that more than six years have passed since the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), there is still a discussion about practicability (advisability) of Kazakhstan’s participation in this international organization, the advantages and challenges associated with such participation. Accordingly, there are many narratives both criticizing the EAEU and Kazakhstan’s participation in it, and emphasizing the benefits of cooperation within this union in the discursive field. At the same time, although according to the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union, the EAEU is “an international organization of regional economic integration,” which “ensures free movement of goods, services, capital and labor within its borders, as well as coordinated, agreed or common policies in the economic sectors” (Eurasian Economic Union, 2014), not only the economic, but also political and geopolitical aspects of this organization are actively discussed. In a number of narratives, it is assumed that membership of Kazakhstan in the EAEU may threaten the sovereignty of the country. At the same time, it is postulated that in the modern world any integration processes are a boon by definition.

The polemic concerning the EAEU is aggravated by the fact that Kazakhstan is a weak state (Jackson, 2016) with weak society (Migdal, 1988; Saikal, 2016): in Kazakhstan there is no consensus on the idea of the State, the State is alienated from society, and society has no significant identification connection (Burnashev, 2015). One of the main features of a weak state is fragmentation: there is a multitude of interest groups that compete with each other to preserve and protect their own practices (including discursive ones), securitizing not the state interest, but group values and goals external to the state. Accordingly, there is a serious risk that in Kazakhstan, in the event of a shift of balance of power, discourses that are both extremely critical of the EAEU and uncritical of the organization may become dominant.

In this situation, understanding the logic of forming discursive practices in Kazakhstan regarding the EAEU and, consequently, narratives, becomes fundamentally important.

II. Methodology

The article is based on an understanding of a narrative as an “utterance (l’*énoncé*)” capable of “account for the appearance and development of all (and not merely verbal) signification” (Greimas and Courtés, 1982, pp. 209–210).

Both official documents and publications in the media have been used as material for analysis. In fact, it is the mass media materials that allow to identify the narratives about the EAEU and Kazakhstan’s participation in the union at all levels — official, academic and expert. Everyday narratives (narratives produced by ordinary people) concerning the EAEU are practically not fixed in Kazakhstan. “The population does not see it [EAEU],” political scientist Lessya Karatayeva said (Iuritsyn, 2019). The same point of view is shared by Sultan Akimbekov, who believes that the discussions on Eurasian integration, which have been debated rigidly among intellectuals, “almost did not affect the general public” (Akimbekov, 2014), and by Eduard Poletaev, who points out that “the EAEU remains largely the initiative of political elites.” Although this organization is open to the media, the essence of the Eurasian Union’s activities is poorly explained to ordinary people”

(Omarova, 2021). At best, there is a duplication of this or that expert narrative by Kazakhstanis.

The analysis of narratives is based on identifying key concepts and establishing structural links between them.

III. Official Narratives

Within the framework of the officially adopted discourse in Kazakhstan, the key point is that the EAEU is positioning as a logical development of the idea of Eurasian integration, expressed by the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbaev in 1994 in his speech at Lomonosov Moscow State University. Then he suggested creating the Eurasian Union (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2011). At the same time, the narratives that form in this field are characterized by several moments.

First, the official discourse field considers the concept of Eurasian integration as a certain continuity. There is a clear continuation from the idea of the Eurasian Union through the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC, the agreement on the establishment signed in 2000) to the Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, launched in 2010, and the Common Economic Space of these countries (2012) and, finally, to the EAEU, that was established in 2014 (Mansurov, 2019).

Secondly, in this field there is a “singled out” and the main speaker – Nursultan Nazarbaev who is positioned as the founder of this project and a person who always supports the idea of integration. For example, as early as in 1994 Nursultan Nazarbaev points out that he “has always advocated integration, primarily considering the human relations that we have” (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2011, p. 330). Moreover, the idea that Nursultan Nazarbaev is “the architect of Eurasian integration” and “its initiator and active proponent” is being actively promoted (Library of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan-Elbassy, 2020). In this regard, it is indicative that of the series of articles published in 2011 in the “Izvestia” newspaper by the leaders of Belarus (Lukashenko, 2011), Kazakhstan (Nazarbaev, 2011) and Russia (Putin, 2011), it was the article by Nursultan Nazarbaev that caused a serious resonance in Kazakhstan. Nursultan Nazarbaev’s

highlighted position is also enshrined in the EAEU itself. Although he stepped down as president of Kazakhstan in 2019, he is the honorary Chairman of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, the highest supranational body of the EAEU.

Thirdly, the official discourse of Kazakhstan defines the structure of the articulation of the issues of Eurasian integration in general, and the EAEU in particular. Even talking about the Eurasian Union, Nursultan Nazarbaev pointed out that between the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States “there is a need for a transition to a qualitatively new level of relations” – the formation of a union (emphasis on the concept of “cooperation” or, in a more rigid form – “integration”). The union involved the creation of supranational bodies designed to “solve two key problems: the formation of a common economic space and the provision of joint defense policy” (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2011, p. 330) (nodal points of the application of cooperation – “economy” and “security”, seen as “geopolitics”). It was assumed that supranational bodies should not address “all other issues relating to the interests of sovereignty, the internal state structure, and the foreign policy activities of each participant” (the concept of “independence”) (President of the republic of Kazakhstan, 2011, p. 330). Later on, the attitude that cooperation within the Eurasian space should have, first, an economic character and not affect the sovereignty of Kazakhstan was strengthened. For example, in 2014, in an interview to the “Khabar” national television channel, Nursultan Nazarbaev noted that the EAEU is an exclusively economic union and, moreover, “Kazakhstan always has the right to withdraw from this union if its independence is threatened” (Sabekov, 2014). All these positions are also reflected in official documents, such as the Concept of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy for 2014–2020, which specifies that the Eurasian economic integration is seen as “one of the effective ways to promote the country to sustainable positions in the system of world economic relations” and “Kazakhstan will strengthen the Customs Union and Common Economic Space in order to create on this basis the Eurasian Economic Union,” while maintaining the principle of inviolability of political sovereignty (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2014). In an article timed to the start of the

Common Economic Space of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia in 2012, Nursultan Nazarbaev once again notes that he “proposed to build integration primarily on the basis of economic pragmatism. Economic interests rather than abstract geopolitical ideas and slogans are the main driver of integration processes.” Here he also notes that the Eurasian Union for him is “a union of states based on the principles of equality, non-interference in the internal affairs of each other, respect for sovereignty” (Nazarbaev, 2011). Later, after leaving the office as President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbaev proposed the option of “sublation” the contradiction between the concepts of “cooperation” and “independence”, noting that “only in cooperation with reliable proven partners and allies can we ensure the economic security and independence of our countries” (Nazarbaev, 2021).

Finally, the official discourse determines the need to fix Kazakhstan’s regionalization. Usually the choice is between Central Asia or Eurasia, with the two concepts not being mutually exclusive. Official narratives about the EAEU use the idea of “Eurasianism”, the content of which is not fixed unequivocally and is transformed depending on certain political or economic conditions. On the one hand, “Eurasianism” is presented as “the idea of integration, cooperation” in the post-Soviet space (Nazarbaev, 1995). On the other, “Eurasianism” is a project that allows Kazakhstan to take some specific, central position in Eurasia, to act as a connecting bridge between large Europe (including Russia) and East Asia, and as a mediator in this space. According to Nursultan Nazarbaev, the Eurasian Union is an open project, it “should be formed as a strong link connecting the Euro-Atlantic and Asian development areas” (Nazarbaev, 2011).

Thus, within the official narratives, the EAEU is positioned as the key integration process for Kazakhstan, but at the same time it is regarded as just one of the components of a wider project of “Eurasianism.” Meanwhile, for President Nursultan Nazarbaev, the project of “Eurasianism”, with all the references to the need to preserve Kazakhstan’s independence in the framework of any integration association and to emphasize the economic nature of the EAEU, focuses primarily on the concepts of “cooperation” and “politics”.

IV. Expert Narratives

The attention of the academic community in Kazakhstan to the processes of cooperation in the Eurasian space is quite weak and unsystematic. The country has practically no special publications on the EAEU subject. However, the EAEU is widely presented in the expert discourse. There are several significant expert forums with some regularity addressing the subject of Eurasian cooperation, such as Kazakhstan-Russia Expert Forum (Nur-Sultan), “The World of Eurasia” Expert Discussion Platform (Almaty), Center for Eurasian Studies of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Almaty). EAEU topics are discussed in mass media as well as on personal pages of experts in social networks. Obviously, the expert field is not monolithic and at the first approximation it breaks down into two large strata – those who have a positive attitude to Kazakhstan’s participation in the EAEU (“eurasioptimists”) and those who oppose the EAEU (“eurasosceptics”). At the same time, it should be noted that these strata, as well as the entire field of expertise with regard to the EAEU, remain uninstitutionalized. Neither opposition to the Eurasian economic integration, nor its support are significant factors of public policy debates in Kazakhstan (as far as policy debates can be talked about in a weak state with weak society). And if the activities aimed at a positive or neutral-critical assessment of the EAEU are held with some degree of regularity, for example, in the monthly meetings of “The World of Eurasia” Expert Discussion Platform¹ then attempts to hold an anti-Eurasian hearing (Radio Azattyq, 2014a, 2014b) have not become systematic.

Another peculiarity of Kazakhstan is that there is no discussion between supporters and opponents of the EAEU; their narratives practically do not touch and do not intersect with each other. Discussions are held in absentia, with no names of opponents.

The fragmentation of the expert field of “eurasioptimists” and “eurasoscopists,” as well as the preferences of experts determine the nature of their discussion of the EAEU issues. In contrast to academic

¹ See materials on the website of the “Eurasia World” Public Foundation (<http://wef.kz/>).

research, usually it is not systematic studies, but a situational response. Splash of experts' interest, as a rule, is fixed in connection with one or another significant event, which is interpreted as able to significantly affect the EAEU and the place of Kazakhstan in it. Such events may include (1) the process of establishing the EAEU or the inclusion of new members into the organization; (2) the manifestation of certain contradictions between the EAEU members, for example, the "closure" of the border between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the autumn of 2017; (3) statements by certain politicians about the situation with the EAEU or its transformation, for example, the comment of the Chairman of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation Valentina Matviyenko about the possibility for Uzbekistan to join the EAEU (October 2019) (TASS, 2019) or the statement of the President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev on the country's reluctance to accept the Strategic Directions for the Development of the Eurasian Economic Integration for 2025 (May 2020) (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020b). Events not directly related to the EAEU, such as the military conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in the fall of 2020 or the statement of TV host Vyacheslav Nikonov that "Kazakhstan's territory is a great gift from Russia and the Soviet Union," (Big Game, 2020) may also serve as a reason for interest in the union. Each such event serves as an occasion for expert assessments, which make it possible to highlight relevant narratives in Kazakhstan regarding the EAEU. Moreover, during the situational expert discussion of such events in the expert narratives all the nodal points of the Kazakhstan's discourse about the EAEU emphasize in one or another form.

IV.1. "Continuity" of the Development of Nursultan Nazarbaev's Integration Project

The issue of succession of various integration projects on the Eurasian space in expert narratives is practically not considered. Generally, by default, they accept the official discourse setting. This allows a number of opposition experts to criticize the EAEU and Kazakhstan's participation in it, exactly as Nursultan Nazarbaev's project. At the same time, this limits the criticism of the EAEU (Tolegenov, 2020).

IV.2. (Geo)politics versus Economy

Experts critical about Kazakhstan's participation in the EAEU are largely inclined to belittle the economic component of the organization and emphasize its low efficiency. For example, political scientist Dosym Sotpayev notes that from the very beginning the Kazakhstani authorities were caught in illusions, the main one being the belief that after joining the EAEU Kazakhstani commodity producers will have unimpeded access to the common market (Satpaev, 2021). Moreover, when analyzing the situation with the EAEU, opponents of the organization, as a rule, emphasize the great importance of some "underlying" factors. For example, on the eve of the signing of the Treaty on the EAEU in 2014 at the scene of the "Anti-Eurasian Forum", political scientist Dastan Kadyrzhanov said that Kazakhstan's entry into the EAEU is "a geopolitical mistake – to follow the tasks that the Kremlin sees as part of the implementation of the Eurasian Economic Union project" (Radio Azattyq, 2014a). According to public figure Aydos Sarym, "The trouble and the problem of these projects [of the Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia and the EAEU] is that all three players [Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia] that are included in them harbour a grudge, all of them have their undeclared goals, tasks, which often go to the detriment of the declared 'economic tasks'" (Kalashnikova, 2014). Political scientist Dosym Satpaev notes that "the optimism of official statistics is worth nothing, since one of the main viruses that initially infected the EAEU is... mutual distrust" and that "since the establishment of the EAEU, its weak point has been that different political games are constantly going on around this association" (Satpaev, 2017). This position is also shared by political scientist Aidar Amrebayev, who believes that "this association more often became an arena of 'trade wars', omissions and emotional strife, rather than a place of stable and rational agreements" (Isabaeva, 2017).

Moreover, the economic component of the EAEU and the processes going on within the union are sometimes simply ignored. For instance, in the fall of 2017, a conflict situation developed between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. On the eve of Kyrgyzstan's presidential election, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev met with one of Kyrgyzstan's

presidential candidates, oppositionist Omurbek Babanov, who has financial interests in Kazakhstan. In this connection, Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev accused Kazakhstan of interfering in his country's internal affairs and made a number of harsh statements against Nazarbaev and the model of power he had established. In response, Kazakhstan imposed restrictive measures on the passage of cars across the Kyrgyz-Kazakh border. In addition to the political component, the measures taken by Kazakhstan had an economic basis: long before the conflict, Kazakhstan had accused Kyrgyzstan of violating EAEU customs regulations and smuggling. When discussing this conflict between the two EAEU member states, a significant number of experts who are negative about the union emphasized its geopolitical component. Aidar Amrebayev points out that in the conflict many “suspected the ‘hand of Moscow’, which seeks to use the old methods of making discord and confusion in the ranks of ‘foreigners’ to give a new impetus to the centripetal vector in the framework of the EAEU — an alliance that demonstrates quite weak dynamics, especially in comparison with other external vectors, such as the Chinese” (Isabaeva, 2017).

Critics of the EAEU associate the “political” component of the union, first and foremost, with Russia. For example, Dosym Satpaev believes that “Russia planted its bomb under this initially artificial integration project, and with its unpredictable foreign policy provoked a whole domino effect, from trade wars to mutual sanctions” (Satpaev, 2017) and, moreover, “Russia initially considered this project only as political, not economic one” (Danilin, 2018). In the opinion of public figure Aydos Sarym, “this alliance is not based on the economic interests of its member states. It is simply an alliance that Russia has created, and it is based only on Russia's interests and goals. I have spoken to both Kazakh and Belarusian economists, nobody can calculate at all and say what are the positive aspects of this union” (Grigoryan, 2015).

At the same time, there are also narratives in Kazakhstan, which emphasize not the foreign policy component of Kazakhstan's participation in the EAEU, but its domestic political vector. Thus, public figure Petr Svoik points out that “If we try to analyze what the real sovereignty of the state of Kazakhstan actually consists of... will have to come to the conclusion that this is mainly a personnel policy”

(Svoik, 2020). Political scientist Talgat Mamyraiymov, analyzing the risks facing Kazakhstan in connection with the EAEU, says, “The question is not that Kazakhstan may lose its independence as a state. The problem is that the [Kazakhstan] elite does not want to lose power. They are afraid to become puppets of Moscow” (Radio Azattyq, 2020). This position is also supported by other experts, who point out that the EAEU is, among other things, a political instrument used by various interest groups in Kazakhstan. For example, Dastan Kadyrzhanov says, “The EAEU... is an alliance of oligarchic regimes trying to create mutual foreign policy support for each other and to extend the years of their rule” (Tatilya, 2014).

Critics of the EAEU mainly see a political component in the expansion of the organization as well. Thus, according to Dosym Satpaev, “the inclusion of Armenia and Kyrgyzstan in the EAEU... had more of a political component than an economic one” (Satpaev, 2017). The possible entry of Uzbekistan into the EAEU is also seen as politically motivated: “It is important for the Kremlin to return this republic to the sphere of its geopolitical influence” (Satpaev, 2019). Dosym Satpaev gives similar assessments of the possibility of expanding the EAEU at the expense of Iran, indicating that “in this case, the EAEU will resemble a club of international outcasts, where not only Iran but also Russia are falling into a pit of sanctions wars and long-term confrontation with the West” (Satpaev, 2021).

Experts who are neutral in their attitude to the EAEU are also critical about widening the Eurasian integration at the expense of “weak participants”. They tend to point out that all candidates should undergo appropriate preparatory procedures, and when Kyrgyzstan and Armenia were included in the EAEU, “political factors undoubtedly played a more important role than economic ones” (Akimbekov, 2014).

It is interesting that some supporters of the EAEU are also inclined to consider the process of EAEU expansion at the expense of Kyrgyzstan and Armenia as first of all politically motivated. Thus, public figure Marat Shibutov points out that “Kyrgyzstan’s exit will only strengthen the EAEU. After all, everybody understands that it didn’t fulfill the Roadmap for joining, where all the problems came from. If there are

only three countries in the EAEU, it will be easier for it to increase integration” (Isabaeva, 2017).

In general, stressing the economic component of cooperation within the EAEU is more typical for expert narratives of the Union’s supporters. Thus, economist Aidarkhan Kusainov points out that “the EAEU is a clear economic platform. And political integration is the wishes or fears of other people, it’s all fantasies” (Gusev, 2019). Moreover, in his opinion, conflicts within the EAEU are a normal process, since “Eurasian integration is a rather serious, problematic process, so in the short-term, immediate future, the normal behavior of each participant of integration will be to defend the interests of their own economy,” but at the same time, “the association creates a platform for building up quality development potential” (Kusainov, 2016). Therefore, for example, unlike the opponents of the union, who believe that Uzbekistan’s entry into the EAEU may happen very quickly on the basis of a “political decision,” they believe, in particular, political scientist Eduard Poletaev, that “it would be foolish for Tashkent to agree or reject this idea without careful study. And this process is not a quick one” (Regnum, 2019).

The reference to economics is also present in the narratives of the EAEU opponents, but as a rule it is reduced to general critical statements. For example, economist Meruert Mahmutova said that “by deciding to join this union, Kazakhstan has worsened its relations with the whole world and improved them only with the Russian Federation” (Kolbaev, 2020). Deeper calculations of the economic consequences of Kazakhstan’s participation in the EAEU, carried out by the organization’s critics, allow them to conclude that the negative aspects are not so much related to the political aspects or the disadvantages of cooperation within the EAEU, as to the fact that “Kazakhstan joined the EAEU without proper preparation of its national economy, primarily its export potential” (Askarov, 2021). Some supporters of Kazakhstan’s participation in the EAEU have a similar position. For example, Aidarkhan Kusainov points out that “the EAEU is a very strong and effective tool that can provide the opportunity for rapid development. However, today it does not bring benefits and is even negative for us due to the fact that we ourselves have formed the wrong policy” (Alibekova, 2021).

At the same time, there are also narratives in the Kazakhstani expert field that offer an option that combines “economic” and “geopolitical” nodes. For example, Askar Nursha notes that the positioning of post-Soviet countries regarding integration projects in the former Soviet Union area, including the EAEU, in addition to economic factors, is no less significantly affected by the perception of these projects through a geopolitical prism by key external geopolitical players and the post-Soviet countries themselves. Thus, a “relationship model based on the synthesis of the ideas of economic integration and geopolitical thinking” is formed (Nursha, 2017).

Finally, neutral-minded economists, in particular Daniyar Dzhumekenov, point out that in the EAEU “supranational institutions have practically no influence either on the political or economic policies of states” and, accordingly, “the merger of the EEU is too underdeveloped to be considered in terms of serious disadvantages or advantages” (Omirebek, 2020). Many neutral narratives focus on a comparative analysis of the situation in different EAEU countries or (Omirebek, 2021) a study of changes within the EAEU space (Taibekuly, 2021).

IV.3. Independence versus Integration

Experts who support Kazakhstan’s participation in the EAEU tend to emphasize the benefits of cooperation, even if it goes beyond economic issues. Opponents proceed from the assumption that any integration restricts the sovereignty of the member states and that Kazakhstan should be careful in assessing non-economic initiatives put forward within the EAEU. Radical opponents of the EAEU believe that the economic vectors of cooperation are also dangerous for Kazakhstan’s independence.

Discrepancies in assessments and, most importantly, in arguments typical for supporters and opponents of the EAEU are quite revealing when they comment on certain initiatives to expand and deepen cooperation within the EAEU. Thus, the proposal of Russian President Vladimir Putin to consider the issue of formation in the future of the currency union of the EAEU member states, announced in March 2015, caused a generally negative reaction in Kazakhstan. At the same time, supporters of the EAEU and government officials spoke moderately

enough and emphasized the economic unacceptability of this initiative. For example, Timur Suleimenov, a board member (minister) on economics and financial policy of the Eurasian Economic Commission, noted that “there are no objective economic prerequisites for the introduction of a single currency in the space of the EAEU member states” (Tengri News, 2015). Later, in 2021, referring to this issue again, economist Vyacheslav Dodonov noted that the issue of supranational currency in the EAEU has never been raised, “it is artificially pushed there from the outside, as a hot topic, as a hot information issue, for some other reasons, far from the real integration” (Dodonov, 2021). The expert notes that the costs of the introduction of the common currency far exceed the possible benefits. The reaction of opponents of the EAEU was stricter and focused primarily on sovereignty issues. For example, Mukhtar Taizhan, a public figure, linked the introduction of the single currency within the framework of the EAEU to “the loss of the rests of Kazakhstan’s sovereignty” (Likhachev, 2015).

It is interesting that the narratives of the EAEU supporters are not homogeneous and include criticism of certain initiatives within the union. Thus, there may be a reference to the need to preserve the sovereignty of Kazakhstan. For example, Aidarkhan Kusainov, analyzing the issue of creating a single currency in the EAEU area, notes that “the issue of a single currency is always a question of a single political space... at the bottom line the creation of a single currency leads to the loss of independence” (Demidov, 2018).

In general, supporters of Kazakhstan’s participation in the EAEU are more likely to focus on possible specific areas for expanding cooperation, primarily in the areas set out in the EAEU Treaty. For example, in November 2018, in the framework of “The World of Eurasia” Expert Discussion Platform, political scientist Eduard Poletayev noted that “the EAEU countries have not yet developed a unified social policy, and moreover — they are increasingly becoming different in this area,” and the question of “whether there is a desire, the possibility of equalizing these social differences” remains open. Political scientist Andrei Chebotarev notes in this regard that “if we see that the common economic space is stalling, it is doubtful to expect that the common social space will work” (MK-Kazakhstan, 2018).

Some experts, analyzing Kazakhstan's place in the EAEU, tend to emphasize the "objective" nature of economic cooperation within the union. So, Peter Svoik, raises a question what will change if Kazakhstan leaves the EAEU, "what will it be free from and what will Kazakhstan gain in case of happy fulfillment of the aspirations of the supporters of 'exclusively sovereign development' of our state?" (Svoik, 2020). According to Peter Svoik, Kazakhstan "will not be released from anything and will not acquire anything," as the position of Kazakhstan's enterprises will not improve, the quality of goods and services produced by them will not increase, the potential for filling the national market will not increase either.

IV.4. Eurasia versus Central Asia

The expert narratives also address the issue of "Eurasianism". According to experts who are critical about the EAEU, this idea should be secondary to the processes of interstate cooperation in the format of Central Asia. For example, Aidar Amrebayev said, "The collapse of the EAEU will not be allowed, but at the same time... the multi-format integration trend in Central Asia will gain strength. This is an objective need" (Isabaeva, 2017). "The Turkic World" is also positioned as an alternative to the EAEU. For example, Aydos Sarym notes that "if a Turkic organization appears, it will be a market bigger than the EAEU one" (Tuleubekova, 2021).

Supporters of the EAEU, as a rule, are either not inclined to use the concept of "Central Asia" or record the difficulties that the EAEU forms for the implementation of any Central Asian project: "Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the EAEU. This is an integration association that offers advantages to its members and at the same time creates barriers to trade with third countries" (Kuzmin, 2019). Central Asian countries that are not members of the EAEU also act as third countries here.

In a neutral format, the assessment of regionalization issues related to the EAEU is presented by political scientist Askar Nursha, who points out that "there are no integration projects in this region that are comparable with the EAEU in terms of their impact, if not to take into account the Central Asian integration project, which began to

gain momentum in the 1990s, but it has not yet been able to acquire the necessary dynamics and is still in the agenda” (Nursha, 2017).

The clash of two groups of narratives — those that support the EAEU and that reject this model of integration, as well as their inclusion in the official discourse — led to a situation that political scientist Zamir Karazhanov described as follows: “Modern Eurasian integration is a version of a compromise between what we wanted and what we got” (Iuritsyn, 2019).

V. Change of Political Leader in Kazakhstan and Narrative about the EAEU

The change of the first official face of the state in Kazakhstan has led to a limited transformation of the official discourse on the EAEU, while retaining its basic meanings and structure. The Concept of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy for 2020–2030 more clearly sets out the limited depth of cooperation within the framework of the EAEU. Noting that close cooperation with the EAEU member states is a priority of Kazakhstan’s diplomacy, the Concept notes that this priority is significant only in “areas established by the EAEU Treaty” (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020a). This narrative was reinforced in the speech of Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at a meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council in May 2020, where he said that “The full inclusion of issues such as health, education and science in the competence of the Eurasian Economic Commission can significantly change its economic orientation, in other words, it will contradict to the essence of the Treaty on the establishment of the E[A]EU in 2015” (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020a). A little later, in an interview to the “Komsomolskaya Pravda” newspaper, the President of Kazakhstan once again stressed the importance of the “economics” node, noting that “the strengthening of the potential of the EAEU as an economic union is of great interest to us” (Sungorkin and al., 2020). And in an interview to “Ana tili” newspaper Kassym-Jomart Tokayev highlighted the node of “independence”, noting that the integration within the EAEU will be supported by Kazakhstan “as long as it will not harm the sovereignty of Kazakhstan” (Ashmzhan, 2020).

An indication of the priority of economic issues was also made in the address of the President of Kazakhstan in connection with the presidency of the country in the EAEU bodies (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021). All five priorities, highlighted in this message, relate to purely economic issues: industrial cooperation; elimination of remaining barriers in mutual trade; fully use the potential of transboundary transport corridors and logistics hubs; digitalization of the economies of the Union countries; expansion of access to foreign markets. At the same time, the use of transit potential and the development of trade and economic relations with third countries obviously go beyond the EAEU space.

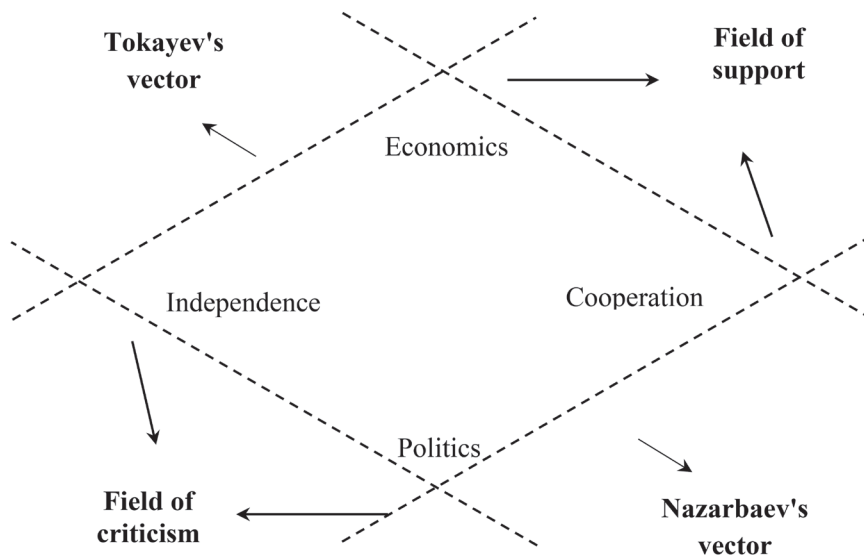
It is also noteworthy that the Concept of Kazakhstan's foreign policy for 2020–2030 does not fix the EAEU as a target setting for Kazakhstan's foreign policy for the next 10 years. At the same time, the importance of Central Asia is increasing. Although the Concept notes that "Kazakhstan needs to consolidate the status... a key element of the system of geopolitical and geo-economic coordinates of the Eurasian continent," at the same time, it is emphasized several times that Kazakhstan is "the leading state in Central Asia" and preservation of this leadership is positioned as one of the goals of the country's foreign policy. Moreover, even the Eurasianism of Kazakhstan is beginning to be read through Central Asia, and the Concept notes the importance of Central Asia in the Eurasian processes.

Thus, the official narratives under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev remained within the framework of the field outlined by Nursultan Nazarbaev, but received a dotted but visible shift towards emphasizing the concepts of "economics" and "independence". The expert narratives have not undergone any changes, fully retaining the key dilemmas and their interpretations.

VI. Conclusion. "Nodal Points" of the Narratives about the EAEU in Kazakhstan

Narratives about the EAEU in Kazakhstan are structurally defined by the identification of the country as a subject of international relations (the concept of "independence"), as well as by the understanding of the

EAEU as an institution of “cooperation”, in which the emphasis is either on “economic” or “political” issues. It is these four concepts in their relationship that determine the field of comprehension of the EAEU and the structure of narratives about the EAEU in Kazakhstan. Their different emphasis and perception determine the variability of narratives. At the same time, the narratives of the EAEU in Kazakhstan fluctuate between two poles: positive and negative.



EAEU narrative field in Kazakhstan

The official narratives cover the entire discussion field, emphasizing both the need for Eurasian cooperation and the need to preserve Kazakhstan’s sovereignty. In this regard, the EAEU is viewed exclusively as an economic organization. At the same time, while in Nursultan Nazarbaev’s project the “Eurasian” context dominated, which strengthened the concepts of cooperation and politics, in Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s project the meaning of this context is reduced, which leads to a more rigid position on the concepts of economy and independence.

Critical narratives view the EAEU as an international political organization promoted primarily by Russia and threatening

Kazakhstan's independence. Cooperation and economic issues are either ignored or remain in the background. In the latter case, both real and contrived negative consequences of cooperation are emphasized. The regionalization of Kazakhstan, as a rule, is not fixed. Sometimes it is stressed either its Central Asian component, or a broader one covering Eurasia or the "Turkic world".

Narratives that positively assess the EAEU focus exclusively on the benefits of cooperation (both regionally and globally), as well as the economic content of the union. Threats to independence are viewed as farfetched. Political issues recede into the background. Kazakhstan is regionalizing as a Eurasian state with strong ties to Central Asia.

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