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KAZAKHSTANI NEO-EURASIANISM AND NAZARBAEV'S ANTI-IMPERIAL FOREIGN POLICY

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Charismatic leadership – both as a concrete achievement and as an aspirational end – represents a recurrent feature in many of the discourses of legitimacy articulated by the state propaganda of post-Soviet Kazakhstan.¹ The country's political leadership, it ought to be noted, is not up for grabs; Kazakhstani politics, since independence, underwent a process of progressive personalisation whereby the presidential figure came to be placed at the core of every decision-making mechanism taking place both within and beyond the state's institutional settings.² Such persistently authoritarian governance cemented the unchallenged and, as confirmed by the 2015 elections,³ virtually unchallengeable leadership of Nursultan A. Nazarbaev.

Charismatic leadership occupies an equally important position within Kazakhstan's external policies, and particularly the neo-Eurasianist course pursued internationally by the Nazarbaev regime since the mid-1990s. This chapter will make extensive use of the expression 'regime neo-Eurasianism' to define the ensemble of policy perspectives, agendas, and ends incorporated in the Eurasianist rubric inaugurated by the speech delivered by Nazarbaev at Moscow State University on 29 March 1994. Kazakhstani Eurasianism, in the views of the official propaganda, is inherent part of the third 'Eurasianist wave', which had reportedly come to the surface after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.⁴ Its actual contribution to the innovation of consolidated interpretations of the *evraziistvo* idea remains questionable; it is hence only a chronological rationale that supports the decision to use the label 'neo-' to define Nazarbaev's Eurasianism throughout this chapter. Association with traditional Eurasianism, on the other hand, served the Kazakhstani propaganda to bestow some theoretical legitimacy upon Nazarbaev's pragmatic form of Eurasianism.⁵ It is the adherence of the latter to the policy priorities, pragmatic agendas, and power considerations of Kazakhstan's authoritarian élite that defines more profoundly Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism: the use of the term 'regime' does hence intend to appropriately place Nazarbaev's neo-*evraziistvo* within Kazakhstan's authoritarian politics.

Regime neo-Eurasianism has to be seen as a policy umbrella that regards charismatic leadership as the ultimate function of legitimacy-seeking strategies implemented across distinct, yet not unrelated, policy-making environments. At domestic level, the policy's

rhetorical component has focused on the issue of anteriority in neo-Eurasianist thinking, to ultimately establish an Eurasianist pedigree for Nazarbaev. The regional facet of regime neo-Eurasianism endeavoured in turn to promote Kazakhstan as Central Asia's key integrator, addressing the numerous discourses of leadership and hegemony articulated by the state propaganda in neighbouring Uzbekistan.⁶ Kazakhstan's ambitions of international leadership sat at the very core of a further segment of the regime's image-making strategy. The acquisition of the rotating chairmanships of international organisations (the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe – OSCE; the Organisation of the Islamic Conference – OIC), the establishment of empty forms of multilateralism in wider Asia (Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia – CICA), and the incessant pursuit of membership in exclusive international bodies (UN Security Council) are integral to the specific policy strand that, ultimately, sought to portray the Kazakhstani state – and the Nazarbaev regime indirectly – as a recognised international leader.⁷

A fourth dimension underpinning Kazakhstan's legitimacy-obsessed neo-Eurasianism relates to the recalibration of the leadership of the numerous multilateral organisations that, since 1992, have continuously (re-)defined the political configuration of post-Soviet Eurasia. In this context, the efforts put by the Kazakhstani regime encompassed the establishment and the promotion of new forms of political and economic association involving the former Soviet states and, furthermore, the clear enunciation of associative principles to support this alternative model of integration.⁸ To these ends, Kazakhstan's neo-Eurasianist rhetoric came to incarnate a series of anti-imperial narratives that targeted different audiences across the post-Soviet political space.

Assessing the anti-imperial inclination of regime neo-Eurasianism does have to be regarded as the central analytical end pursued by the present chapter. The anti-imperial contours of Kazakhstani neo-*evraziistvo* addressed more in particular those specific forms of politico-economic hegemony that the Russian Federation framed across post-Soviet Eurasia in multilateral terms, via the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the *EvrAziiskoe Ekonomicheskoe Soobshchestvo* (Eurasian Economy Community - EvrAzEs), and, more recently, the *EvrAziiskii Ekonomicheskii Soyuz* (Eurasian Economic Union - EEU). Regime neo-Eurasianism, in this sense, featured an anti-imperial disposition insofar as it pursued a counter-hegemonic agenda deeply imbued within the logic of authoritarian governance that dominates Kazakhstani politics.

Linkages with the Russian Federation are therefore central to the argument articulated here, inasmuch as Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism endeavoured to rethink Eurasian

multilateralism by reassessing centre-periphery relations in the former USSR. At rhetorical level, Astana's shifting perceptions of the Kremlin had been informed by specific leadership-focused narratives, which official propaganda framed in support of Kazakhstan's neo-Eurasianist foreign policy. In policy terms, Nazarbaev's anti-imperial outlook attempted to steer – not always successfully, it might be added – the course of Kazakhstan's bilateral relations with the Russian Federation.

The Kazakhstani perception of Russia's ambitions of multilateral hegemony will be contextualised here within the theoretical and operational policy shifts that have characterised regime neo-Eurasianism since its original formulation. In presenting Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism as a pragmatically anti-imperial project, this chapter does therefore intend to unveil the trajectory through which interrelated questions of power and leadership had come to underpin the numerous oscillations emerged within the Russo-Kazakhstani partnership from 1992 onwards. To this end, this contribution will place its analytical focus on key foreign policy pronouncements made by Nazarbaev in the post-1994 years, dissecting their anti-imperial inclinations, tones, and outlook. The pragmatically anti-imperial facet of Nazarbaev's neo-Eurasianist discourse has been built upon two distinct but by no means disconnected narratives, which are respectively focused on *integratsiya* (integration) and *suvernitet* (sovereignty). By examining how the legitimacy/foreign policy nexus permeated these intersecting discourses, this chapter will put forward an alternative reading of the anti-imperial and counter-hegemonic connotation that continues to permeate regime neo-Eurasianism. The analytical issue of continuity and change is thus central to the argument articulated here. The contrast between Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism and Russia's hegemonic multilateralism will be analysed in time, to ultimately reveal that, with the return of Vladimir V. Putin to the Kremlin in 2012, this conflicting relationship evolved into the juxtaposition of two essentially pragmatic forms of neo-Eurasianism.

This contribution is ultimately based on the presentation of three snapshots in which twin narratives of *integratsiya* and *suvernitet* accompanied the establishment or, at other junctures, the disintegration of a number of Eurasian multilateral organisations that included, in different capacities, both Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation. Here, textual analysis will be intimately connected to the study of actual policy, in order to contextualise the Eurasian prong of Kazakhstani-sponsored multilateralism within the emergence, consolidation, and evolution of anti-imperial narratives that have characterised Kazakhstan's regime rhetoric since the mid-1990s. Empirical focus will be directed throughout the three organisations that more ostensibly attempted to reintegrate the economies of post-Soviet

Eurasia: the *EvrAziiskii Soyuz* (Eurasian Union), the EvrAzEs, and the EEU. It is precisely through the institutionalisation of this latter organisation – arguably the most significant development in post-Soviet regionalism to have emerged in the last 20 years – that the originally anti-imperial disposition of regime neo-Eurasianism failed more visibly, as the analysis of post-Crimea evolutions of the Russo-Kazakhstani relationship will ultimately demonstrate.

Snapshot One: The 1994 Moscow Speech and the *EvrAziiskii Soyuz*

A cursory look at the geopolitical context that surrounded Nazarbaev's first Moscow speech⁹ captures most appropriately the anti-imperial undertone that permeated what is generally regarded as the foundational document of Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism. The speech, which followed by a few months the disintegration of the *rublevaya zona* (November 1993), embodied Kazakhstan's tangible disillusion with the integrationist model promoted through the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).¹⁰ The apparent objective pursued by Nazarbaev in the speech related to the launch of the *EvrAziiskii Soyuz* (EAS), an overly vague and generally unstructured multilateral organisation that sought the politico-economic reintegration of post-Soviet Eurasia. At the time, Kazakhstani policy-makers adopted a very restrictive definition of the geographical constituents of the Eurasian political space, narrowly focusing their understanding of the EAS organisational remit on the CIS area.¹¹

Operationally, the EAS is best described as a total failure. Nazarbaev's *Soyuz* was received with scarce enthusiasm by Uzbekistan and Russia – the two partners that the speech explicitly singled out as the key constituents of the EAS.¹² No policy preparation preceded the launch of the EAS; no substantive policy drive supported post-speech institutionalisation: the *EvrAziiskii Soyuz* remained in this sense a largely irrelevant forum *vis-à-vis* post-Soviet *integratsiya*. It is this organisation's rhetorical dimension that needs to be analysed more closely to locate the speech's counter-hegemonic agenda within the Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianist continuum.

In outlining the principles upon which to build the EAS, Nazarbaev referred to *dobrovol'nosti* (free will) and *ravnopraviya* (equality of rights). Rather than focusing on the specific integrationist disposition carried out through the *EvrAziiskii Soyuz*, Nazarbaev deliberately concentrated on the fundamental principles to be followed while accessing the EAS. Membership in this organisation was meant to be voluntary and thus genuinely unconstrained. In Nazarbaev's views, upholding the principle of non-interference was

ultimately meant to guarantee the sovereignty (*suvernitet*) of the member states. In post-Crimea Eurasia, this specific emphasis has come to acquire an even greater relevance.¹³

The Kazakhstani president tailored the first Moscow speech around the political imperative of recalibrating the leadership of Eurasian integration away from the Russian Federation. Not surprisingly, *quasi* exclusive focus on accession principles prevented Nazarbaev from elaborating upon the specific policy areas that the EAS was meant to integrate: a brief passage on the creation of a unified economic space (*formirovanie edinogo ekonomicheskogo prostranstva*) and the establishment of a common defence strategy (*obespechenie sovместnoi oboronnoi politiki*) represented the speech's only specific mentions of the policy areas that the EAS purported to integrate. Interestingly, the speech clarified how the EAS would relate to the CIS: Nazarbaev's *Soyuz* was not to be seen as a mere replacement for the Commonwealth, insofar as its (allegedly) revolutionary associative outlook meant to improve the patterns of inter-state cooperation that were already in place across the post-Soviet region.¹⁴ This specific argument facilitated Nazarbaev in advancing another important point: as Russia remained¹⁵ at the time Kazakhstan's most crucial partner (at least in economic terms),¹⁶ the prospected amendment of Eurasia's multilateral configuration inscribed in EAS institutionalisation was not ultimately intended as a driver for change within the Almaty-Moscow bilateral relationship.

This cursory analysis of the 1994 Moscow speech stimulates three key observations on the anti-imperial outlook that regime neo-Eurasianism had come to display at its very onset. To begin with, the speech envisaged an alternative configuration for Eurasian multilateralism. By outlining a union of equal partners, Nazarbaev suggested that Russia would recede back into the fold of post-Soviet states, while Kazakhstan would progressively emerge as the leading integrator in the post-Soviet region.

Systematic failure to outline a structured integrationist plan has to be seen as a deliberate component of the speech: in Nazarbaev's narrative – which was to become a focal point for Kazakhstan's post-1994 foreign policy propaganda – the perception of leadership is intrinsically more important than leadership itself. This proposition contextualises with greater precision the very limited policy drive that supported EAS institutionalisation from mid-1994 onwards. More than a genuine integrationist forum, the *Evraziiskii Soyuz* came in this sense to represent a vehicle for Nazarbaev's leadership ambitions.

These two preliminary conclusions support a clearer delineation of the rejuvenating neo-Eurasianist impetus allegedly inscribed in the Moscow speech. The Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianist push of the mid-1990s remained a purely rhetorical construct in both policy and

ideological terms. In relation to policy, the Nazarbaev regime failed to follow up in any significant way on the launch the *EvrAziiskii Soyuz*. At the ideological level, while neo-Eurasianist themes began to surface with some regularity in the Kazakhstani regime narratives of the mid-1990s,¹⁷ the ultimate failure to operationalise the EAS led to this organisation's exclusion from Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianist propaganda, which continued in this sense to be narrowly focused on the glorification of the presidential persona.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the profoundly rhetorical outlook of the first Moscow speech conferred Nazarbaev's counter-hegemonic rhetoric a surprisingly pro-Russian disposition, inscribing a paradoxical undertone at the core of the policy ensemble operating under Kazakhstan's neo-Eurasianist rubric. Regime neo-Eurasianism, since its very onset, was never meant to alienate the Kremlin: the president's pragmatism, in this sense, aspired to centre the Eurasian multilateral system – at the time narrowly confined to the territory of the former Soviet Union – on a solid Russo-Kazakhstani axis. How to reconcile solid bilateral linkages with the apparently counter-hegemonic agenda pursued by Nazarbaev's calls for a more equal form of post-Soviet *re-integratsiya*? The next segment began to delineate the contours of the answer to this question, addressing one of the key concerns of the present contribution.

Snapshot Two: The EvrAzEs as a neo-Eurasianist Tandem

A peculiar – although not entirely unpredictable – evolution in the anti-imperial outlook of Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism crystallised in the mid-2000s. On 7 October 2005, at a summit held in Sankt Petersburg, the leaders of the *Tsentral'naya Aziya Sotrudinchestvo* (TsAS) sanctioned the dissolution of the organisation by endorsing the confluence of all member states in the EvrAzEs.¹⁸ President Nazarbaev presented the dissolution of TsAs as his personal foreign policy triumph: EvrAzEs enlargement, in Nazarbaev's views, had come to incarnate the success encountered internationally by his neo-Eurasianist vision.¹⁹

Before the 2005 enlargement, the integrationist agenda promoted through the EvrAzEs framework featured a predominantly functionalist outlook, as this organisation aimed at first to develop the Customs Union and, between 2003 and the eruption of the Orange Revolution (November 2004), sought to incorporate Ukraine in a Common Economic Space with Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.²⁰ The enlargement of EvrAzEs hence represents the political juncture at which two usually alternative forms of neo-Eurasianism – namely those elaborated by the Nazarbaev regime on the one hand and the first Putin Administration

on the other – came to display a relatively converging outlook. Ultimately, this might be seen as a rather surprising development, given the counter-hegemonic tones that had frequently characterised regime neo-Eurasianism throughout 1994-2005 and the mildly reassertive foreign policy stand that the Kremlin had come to adopt in the early 2000s.

The timidly Eurasianist inclination that Putin displayed in his first term in office (2000-2004) led to the implementation of an agenda of reassertion, which the Kremlin framed across the post-Soviet space through a series of “more active and arguably more successful”²¹ multilateral organisations, including the EvrAzEs.²² Putin’s embryonic *evraziistvo* was in this sense very pragmatic, and narrowly centred its attention on post-Soviet re-*integratsiya* – a policy area on which Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism had been obsessively focusing since the mid-1990s. Putin’s earlier Eurasianist forays were at the same time relatively conservative; Russia limited to reinstate its leadership in the post-Soviet space without attempting to revolutionise the multilateral, geopolitical, and geo-economic configuration that the region had acquired before Putin’s accession to power.²³

Russia’s new assertiveness was not seen in Astana as a direct challenge to the ends pursued by Nazarbaev’s neo-Eurasianism. It was Kazakhstan’s leadership-obsessed foreign policy that stimulated most decisively the temporary marriage of neo-Eurasianist convenience celebrated in 2005 through EvrAzEs institutionalisation. There is perhaps no better way to capture the ultimate sense of the prior proposition than by analysing the speech²⁴ that N.A. Nazarbaev delivered at the first summit of the revamped EvrAzEs, held in Sankt Petersburg on 25 January 2006. In this context, the Kazakhstani president focused at length on the specific implications held by Uzbekistan’s accession to the organisation. In Nazarbaev’s words, the Uzbek membership in EvrAzEs had the potential to ‘open new opportunities to put into practice the idea of Eurasian integration [...] and enhance the global credibility of the Eurasian Economic Community’.

Was Nazarbaev’s speech a show of Central Asian solidarity, as it welcomed Uzbekistan back into the Eurasian fold? It might be more reasonable to suggest that, in this context, the narrative advanced by the Kazakhstani president targeted the same end pursued in his 1994 Moscow speech, namely the recalibration of multilateral leadership across post-Soviet Eurasia. To be properly understood, rhetorical emphasis on the Uzbek accession has to be placed within Nazarbaev’s composite characterisation of the EvrAzEs. On the one hand, EvrAzEs was regarded as the legitimate incarnation of Nazarbaev’s neo-Eurasianist *initsiativa*, insofar as it represented the direct descendant of the defunct *EvrAziskii Soyuz* – a multilateral framework to which, as we have seen earlier, Uzbekistan had never subscribed.

At the same time, EvrAzEs – after the dismantlement of TsAS – had come to represent the only institutional umbrella to which all Central Asian republics (with the notable exception of Turkmenistan) had subscribed. Nazarbaev’s 2006 speech, in this sense, subtly remarked that Uzbekistan was entering an Eurasian integrationist framework led in tandem by Kazakhstan and, most interestingly, the Russian Federation. To this end, Nazarbaev clearly identified two policy areas – namely nuclear cooperation (*ispol’zovaniya atomnoi energii*) and monetary integration (*ob organizatsii integrirovannogo valyutovo rynka*) – in which a Russo-Kazakhstani axis could stimulate the future progress of the EvrAzEs.

This particular lens might help explaining the conspicuous absence, from Nazarbaev’s 2006 speech, of any substantive reference to the *suvernitet* of EvrAzEs member states and to the imperative importance that non-interference held *vis-à-vis* association practices in the EvrAzEs framework. Values and principles that in 1994 appeared to be indispensable to the full execution of Nazarbaev’s neo-Eurasianist agenda had in this sense disappeared from the version of Kazakhstani neo-*evraziistvo* that crystallised in the mid-2000s. The 2006 speech deliberately centred Eurasian integration on a solid partnership connecting Astana with Moscow: Kazakhstani foreign policy rhetoric, in this sense, can be said to have completed a parabolic evolution in which the Kremlin – which in the early post-Soviet era was seen as Central Asia’s ‘authoritative uncle’²⁵ – had come to be regarded as an indispensable partner for the translation of Nazarbaev’s neo-Eurasianist *idea* into a definitely more structured – as well as Kazakhstani-led – multilateral *initsiativa*. The political facet of this evolutionary process manifested itself as early as August 2000,²⁶ when, at a TsAES summit held in Bishkek, Nazarbaev enthusiastically endorsed a declaration that assigned to Russia a central role in the management of Central Asia’s security structures. In economic terms, the (re-)emergence of Russo-Kazakhstani bilateralism came to be portrayed as a decisive factor in Eurasian economic cooperation: Nazarbaev’s Sankt Petersburg speech singled out the establishment of the Eurasian Development Bank, finalised in January 2006, as a practical manifestation of the partnership’s beneficial contribution to EvrAzEs integration.

The 2006 speech, to a very significant extent, captures rhetorically the policy alignment between the mid-2000s version of regime neo-Eurasianism and the set of Eurasian strategies put into practice by the first Putin Administration. With Putin’s accession to power, Russo-Kazakhstani bilateral ties had received a new impulse.²⁷ At multilateral level, this new stage in the partnership was mirrored by the sustained economic action through which Putin attempted to reinvigorate Russia’s presence in the former Soviet space.²⁸ Nazarbaev’s rhetorical (re-)appropriation of the EvrAzEs was profoundly congruent with this policy

context, insofar as it allowed Kazakhstani propaganda to articulate a discourse of neo-Eurasianist leadership that matched the pragmatic expectations held by the Kremlin in the Eurasian geo-political landscape. This specific context, ultimately, offers a more precise characterisation of the temporary dilution that the anti-imperial undertones of regime neo-Eurasianism had come to experience in the early- and mid-2000s.

The analysis of the policy snapshot related to EvrAzEs enlargement, and most importantly to the latter's impact on the anti-imperial agenda pursued by Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism, hence suggested three critically important conclusions. To begin with, Nazarbaev seems to have abandoned, temporarily at least, his characteristic emphasis on sovereignty, while framing a revised version of the official Kazakhstani discourse on *integratsiya*. Change in the rhetorical component of regime neo-Eurasianism reflected wider shifts in Kazakhstan's perception of the role that Moscow was playing in post-Soviet Eurasia. The mid-2000s version of Kazakhstan's neo-Eurasianist rhetoric came to feature a less markedly counter-hegemonic outlook, perhaps in response to the marginally imperial agenda pursued in post-Soviet Eurasia by the first Putin Administration.

In another major departure from the content of the Moscow speech, the mid-2000s version of regime neo-Eurasianism also ceased to focus obsessively on the specific associative principles upon which to build a discourse of *integratsiya* in Eurasia. This is not to however say that Kazakhstani policy-makers had turned their attention to the formulation of specific integrationist measures: the eventual failure of the EvrAzEs is directly related to the perpetuation of the chaotic *modus operandi* that regulated the institutional settings of the CIS (or those emerged, at Central Asian level, within the TsAS framework).

Finally, the establishment of a neo-Eurasianist axis between Astana and Moscow exerted a durable impact upon the associative praxis crystallising across post-Soviet Eurasia. From 2000 onwards, the segment of Nazarbaev's *initsiativa* that focussed on the former Soviet Union was to be exclusively centred on an institutional continuum – namely the EvrAzEs/Customs Union/EEU – that had at its very core the Russo-Kazakhstani partnership. The specific posture that Russia adopted in post-Soviet Eurasia during the first Putin presidency and in the Medvedev interim (2008-2012) led Kazakhstani policy-makers to frame a targeted discourse of (re-) *integratsiya* in which sovereignty lost the centrality it occupied during the El'tsin years. This dynamics was to change dramatically as Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012.

Snapshot Three: Post-Crimea neo-Eurasianism and the *Suvernitet* Conundrum

The policy manifesto that opened Putin's second presidential term did unequivocally identify Eurasia as the key geopolitical focus for Russia's post-2011 foreign policy. In promoting the institutionalisation of the EEU via a specific article published on the *Izvestiya* during the final stages of his Prime Ministership,²⁹ V.V. Putin set into motion a process through which Russia endeavoured to reappropriate a set of key foreign policy concepts that had traditionally been integral to the discourses of *integratsiya* formulated by post-Soviet Kazakhstan. The article was inherent part of Putin's electoral campaign, and served as a blueprint for the foreign policy strategy to be implemented by the Russian Federation after the election.

Did the article ultimately open a new phase in Putin neo-Eurasianism³⁰? The structure of the piece, to start with, was congruent with the tradition of pragmatic integrationism that had often characterised Kazakhstan's *evraziiskaya strategiya*. Emphasis on functionalism underpinned the *Izvestiya* piece just as it did with many of Nazarbaev's neo-Eurasianist speeches, replicating the operational vagueness that had often permeated official declarations on Kazakhstani multilateralism. Through this article, the Russian leader solemnly – and, with the privilege of hindsight, surprisingly – reinstated the importance that state sovereignty held *vis-à-vis* EEU association, by remarking that a prospective member 'must only join on its sovereign decision based on its long-term national interests'. The article aspired on the other hand to introduce Putin as the leader of post-Soviet multilateralism, insofar as it purportedly established an institutional continuum between the EEU and the Commonwealth of Independent States – an ultimately moribund integrationist project that, since 1991, had been indisputably led by the Russian Federation. The *Izvestiya* piece, finally, ambitiously attempted to place the EEU in a more global context, briefly addressing the engagement options available to this organisation to relate to analogous multilateral institutions located in both West (European Union) and East (Asia-Pacific Economic Community - APEC; Association of Southeast Asia Nations - ASEAN).

Putin's neo-Eurasianism, at least in the version outlined in the *Izvestiya* editorial, had hence come to pose specific challenges to the leadership agenda pursued by Kazakhstani foreign policy-makers in post-Soviet Eurasia. In 2010, the OSCE Chairmanship contributed to elevate Nazarbaev's profile as an internationally recognised leader.³¹ In 2011-2012, the second rise of Putin endeavoured to significantly constrain the ambitions of Eurasian leadership held by the Kazakhstani president. It is therefore not unsurprising that Nazarbaev, less than a month after the publication of Putin's article, authored a parallel *Izvestiya* commentary, in which he proceeded to illustrate his own understanding of the future

multilateral configuration of post-Soviet Eurasia.³² Nazarbaev's *Izvestiya* article was in turn very optimistic about the functionalist development of the EEU, which was presented by the Kazakhstani leader as an economic "megaproject" adequately placed to respond to present and future challenges. This optimism was destined to wane with the eruption of the Crimean crisis, an event that would only amplify the significance of the multifaceted challenges that the neo-Eurasianist impetus of the second Putin Administration had come to pose to the full execution of Kazakhstan's neo-Eurasianist agenda.

Since the mid-1990s, a significant segment of Kazakhstan's official propaganda had focused, with *quasi* obsessive regularity, on the crucial importance held by the first Moscow speech *vis-à-vis* the establishment of a neo-Eurasianist strand in Kazakhstan's foreign policy strategy. To celebrate the 20th anniversary of this allegedly seminal speech, N.A. Nazarbaev planned a trip to Moscow to deliver a lecture on Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism, with the deliberate view to reinvigorate his credentials as Eurasia's key integrator. The speech was to be originally delivered in late March 2014. In the tumultuous settings that emerged from Crimea's annexation, Kazakhstani officials were not only forced to postpone the presidential trip but, most importantly, had to rethink the speech's contents and its fundamental tone. There is no political statement than captures with greater precision the mood in post-Crimea Eurasia than Nazarbaev's second Moscow speech, delivered at Moscow State University on 28 April 2014 – only four weeks prior to the signature of the trilateral Treaty establishing the EEU, ratified in Astana on 29 May 2014.³³ The speech was framed as a further response to Putin's *Izvestiya* article and, simultaneously, intended to situate a Kazakhstani-led *integratsiya* discourse within the geopolitics of post-Crimea Eurasia.

In his 2014 speech, Nazarbaev advanced two main points to address Putin's apparent attempts to hijack the paternity of post-Soviet *integratsiya*. To begin with, the speech elaborated at length on Kazakhstan's official views on the origins of the protracted and – in Nazarbaev's own words – deeply flawed process that led to the (then) imminent institutionalisation of the EEU. Since its very onset, the speech had made abundantly clear that the Eurasian Economic Union had to be regarded as a direct descendant of the *Evraziiskii Soyuz* – the organisation that Nazarbaev launched at MSU in 1994. Nazarbaev's neo-Eurasianist *initsiativa* 'changed the nature (*kharakter*) [of] and gave dynamism (*dinamizm*)' to the CIS, building on the Commonwealth to create a revised – and in the long-term more successful – integrative forum. Yet again, the logic of leadership recalibration came to permeate a major presidential pronouncement on neo-Eurasianist *integratsiya*. At the same time, markedly anti-imperial tones resurfaced to characterise the presidential rhetoric, as

Nazarbaev reprised one of the key themes of his 1992 speech, namely the importance of unconstrained access to EEU integration. Here, the Kazakhstani president made a deliberate point to reinstate that the principles of *dobrovol'nosti* and *ravnopraviya* underpinned his *integratsiya* vision in 2014, just as they did it in 1994. Renewed emphasis on accession procedures – which as we have seen constituted very marginal rhetorical concerns in the statements of the mid-2000s – is not accidental: post-Crimea Eurasia had become an inhospitable milieu for the leaderships governing the former Soviet periphery. It is through the interrelated concepts of *suvernitet* and *gosudarstvenost'* (statehood) that the speech aimed to bring together the dual rhetoric of *integratsiya* and leadership: Nazarbaev, in addressing his Moscow audience, deliberately remarked that Kazakhstan's neo-Eurasianist *initsiativa* had always taken into account the sovereignty and independence (*nezavisimost'*) of prospective partners. This was the point that, in the president's rhetorical framework, was instrumental to deliberately open a gulf between regime neo-Eurasianism, the imperial integration fostered in the Soviet era, and, most importantly, the post-Crimea, and hence neo-imperial, version of Putin's *evraziistvo*.

The second Moscow speech failed to include, perhaps not accidentally, explicit anti-Russian tones: the Astana-Moscow axis, in Nazarbaev's words, remained a model for bilateral relations around the globe. Kazakhstan's decision-makers, throughout the post-Crimea years, may be said to have followed this approach at policy level with some consistency. While the intensity of the Russo-Kazakhstani bilateral relationship managed to remain high, the post-Crimea configuration of Eurasian multilateralism lost much of its momentum. Although Kazakhstan joined the Eurasian Economic Union as a full partner in May 2014, effective integration in the EEU stumbled across many problems, including Kazakhstan's reluctance to deepen cooperation in specific policy areas³⁴ and, most importantly, the eruption of trade wars³⁵ between the partners. The political reality of the post-2014 years, in this sense, obliterated the economic optimism that characterised the vision of EEU integration outlined by Nazarbaev in this *Izvestiya* commentary.

To all intents and purposes, the second Moscow speech did not rest upon a rhetorical infrastructure much dissimilar from that which permeated Nazarbaev's first MSU statement. Does this proposition somehow imply that Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism had remained a static policy framework for more than two decades?

Kazakhstan's neo-Eurasianism has consistently adhered to those set of power technologies designed by the regime to operate externally to the Kazakhstani state. This might explain the policy's obsession with leadership, and its incessant pursue of rhetorical

ends designed in glorification of Nazarbaev, his achievements, and his historic role as Kazakhstan's first leader. This policy line remained firmly at the core of regime neo-Eurasianism for twenty years. What did ultimately change, on the other hand, it is the geopolitical environment in which the policy had to operate: Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism was designed in a nominally hostile milieu, in which Russia's imperial legacies led decision-makers in Almaty to draw a new institutional map for post-Soviet Eurasia. While it developed in a somehow friendlier environment – and this might explain the temporary dilution of counter-hegemonic tones that emerged in the mid-2000s – regime neo-Eurasianism has since the eruption of the Crimea crisis returned to operate at a juncture at which Russia adopted a newly assertive posture in Eurasia.

It is the cyclical evolution of post-Soviet geopolitics that hence explains the fundamental similarities between the two Moscow speeches and, on a wider perspective, the differences between the forms of neo-Eurasianism sponsored by the Nazarbaev regime and the second Putin Administration. This lens, at the same time, does very appropriately allow us to reconsider the recent sovereignty-focused diatribe between Nazarbaev and Putin – a dispute that had some apparent neo-Eurasianist implications.

In a speech³⁶ delivered to the 2014 National Youth Forum in Seliger (Tver *oblast'*), V.V. Putin made a series of oddly double-edged remarks about his Kazakhstani counterpart. On the one hand, he proceeded to recognise Nazarbaev as a sophisticated (*gramotnyi*) political operator and the original mind behind the creating of the EEU, echoing in this sense the key themes addressed by the Kazakhstani president in his *Izvestiya* piece as well as in the second MSU speech. On the other, Putin went as far as questioning the ultimate *raison d'être* of the Kazakhstani state, remarking that the Kazakhs never enjoyed statehood (*u kazakhov ne bylo nikogda gosudarvennosti*) before Nazarbaev's accession to power. Nate Schenkkan³⁷ and Marlene Laruelle³⁸ have written extensively about the Kazakhstani reaction to the comments made by Putin on Kazakhstan's sovereignty, and have successfully placed them in their contextualisation of the EEU's declining institutional efficacy. Interestingly, the Selinger comments had major impacts on the three rhetorical narratives – *suvernitet*, *integratsiya*, leadership – that, as we have seen throughout this chapter, sit at the very heart of regime neo-Eurasianism. Schenkkan and Laruelle, indirectly yet not unconvincingly, related the Selinger comments to the *suvernitet* and *integratsiya* narratives, explaining in this sense the domestic³⁹ and EEU-specific implications of Kazakhstan's highly rhetorical response to Putin's remarks. So far as those narratives focussing on Nazarbaev's leadership, the Selinger comments, by questioning Kazakhstani statehood, did indirectly probe the legitimacy of the

Kazakhstani president: if Kazakhstani statehood is somehow questionable, can we regard his president as a legitimate leader? Framing an adequate answer to this question does represent one of the most pressing foreign policy challenges that Kazakhstan will face in the post-Crimea years.

Concluding Remarks

Since the mid-1990s, the projection of Kazakhstan as a leader in Eurasia crystallised as a central concern for the strand of neo-Eurasianism promoted by N.A. Nazarbaev and his associates. Kazakhstani neo-*evraziistvo* came to feature a constantly inclusionary disposition, playing a key role in the periodic reconfigurations of the Eurasian political space that came to the fore after the establishment, or alternatively the dismissal, of multilateral organisations attempting to re-integrate the former USSR. The nature of Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism hence led policy-makers in Almaty/Astana to reconceptualise centre-periphery relations in the former Soviet Union, placing Kazakhstan's linkages with the Russian Federation at the core of the re-integrationist efforts made by the Nazarbaev regime. No integrationist initiative that excluded Russia, in this sense, was seen as viable by the leadership in Astana, given the peculiar domestic agenda attached to Kazakhstan's neo-Eurasianist foreign policy.

As it had to respond to the logic of authoritarian stability that traditionally dominated Kazakhstani politics and policy-making, Nazarbaev's neo-Eurasianism acquired a distinctive regime-centred orientation, serving in this sense many of the pragmatic purposes connected with the power technologies devised by the élite in Astana. This chapter identified the discursive legitimisation of the Eurasian leadership of Nursultan Nazarbaev as one of the key objectives that Kazakhstan's neo-Eurasianist foreign policy has pursued since the 1990s. In this context, the neo-Eurasianist re-interpretation of Kazakhstan's relationship with the former Soviet hegemon – the Russian Federation – emerged as a concern wielding particularly significant influence over the legitimacy agenda of the Nazarbaev regime.

Revisiting centre-periphery linkages across the Eurasian political space with a view to enhance Nazarbaev's legitimacy as Eurasia's key integrator led regime neo-Eurasianism – the brand of neo-*evraziistvo* promoted by post-Soviet Kazakhstan – to develop a relatively marked counter-hegemonic outlook. Anti-imperial tones, as this chapter has argued, came to characterise some of the most important neo-Eurasianist pronouncements that Nazarbaev made since the launch of Kazakhstan's *evraziiskaya strategiya*. Emphasis on the equality of rights held by the states integrating their economies across Eurasia and, most importantly, on the significance that sovereignty continues to hold in post-Soviet forms of *integratsiya*

underpinned the anti-imperial discourses through which Nazarbaev came to describe Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism. Exclusive focus on *suvernitet* and equality of rights, at the same time, is not sufficient to justify the anti-imperial characterisation that this chapter made of regime neo-Eurasianism. More precisely, it is the latter's unrelenting focus on leadership that delineates with greater precision the counter-hegemonic contours of Kazakhstan's neo-Eurasianist policy.

While predicating the stipulation of new associative principles to regulate post-Soviet (re-) *integratsiya*, Kazakhstan's neo-Eurasianist discourse did actually intend to highlight the imprint of Nazarbaev's leadership over these allegedly innovative principles. In the views of the official propaganda, Kazakhstani-sponsored integrationism – which unfolded in a multilateral continuum stretching from the *EvrAziiskii Soyuz* to the Eurasian Economic Union – intended to promote an alternative concept of Eurasia, in which Russia was to act as a partner and not as a leader. The latter proposition might explain why Nazarbaev's neo-Eurasianist speeches came to regularly focus on leadership re-calibration *vis-à-vis* Eurasia's multilateral configuration, by minimising the regional relevance of Russia-centric organisations (CIS), promoting the rebalancing of their leadership (EvrAzEs), or highlighting the Kazakhstani input in their initial establishment (EEU). This composite strategy of recalibration appears to be thoroughly consistent with, and profoundly inspired by, the image-making ends that have often permeated the Kazakhstani process of foreign policy-making.

Constant focus on leadership recalibration forced Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism to continuously renegotiate its multilateral outlook with the Russian Federation. This chapter outlined Russia's evolving perception of post-Soviet *integratsiya*, suggesting that the Kremlin's neo-Eurasianism, due to its essentially pragmatic agenda, has often clashed with the leadership-obsessed agenda promoted by Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism. The temporary realignment of the mid-2000s lost much relevance as the EvrAzEs evolved into the Eurasian Economic Union, a Putin-dominated integrative framework that, especially in the post-Crimea years, simply ignored the associative principles reportedly inspired by Nazarbaev.

The alternation of hegemonic and anti-hegemonic multilateralism across post-Soviet Eurasia led in this sense to the crystallisation of the EEU as the region's key integrationist forum. Notwithstanding its apparent interest in reaching out to Turkey and Vietnam, the EEU remains an essentially post-Soviet club. The obsessive focus that policy-makers in Astana placed on the president's discursive leadership led Kazakhstani neo-*evraziistvo* to narrowly focus its perception of Eurasia to the post-Soviet space: the anti-imperial narratives illustrated

in this chapter suggested that Nazarbaev's leadership ambitions were exclusively formulated *vis-à-vis* the Russian Federation. Regime neo-Eurasianism may be expected to pursue legitimacy-focused agendas for much of Nazarbaev's residual time in charge: however alternative and innovative Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism might actually be, its operationalisation is hence likely to be confined a relatively small segment of the wider Eurasian region.

Notes

¹ Rico Isaacs, “‘Papa’ Nazarbayev: The Discourse of Charismatic Leadership and Nation-Building in post-Soviet Kazakhstan,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 10 (2010): 435-52. On this note, see also: Diana T. Kudaibergenova, “The ideology of development and legitimation: Beyond ‘Kazakhstan 2030’,” *Central Asian Survey* 34 (2015): 440-55.

² Sally N. Cummings, “Kazakhstan: An uneasy relationship”, in *Power and Change in Central Asia*, ed. S.N. Cummings (London-New York: Routledge, 2001), 65.

³ OSCE-ODIHR, *Kazakhstan. Early Presidential Election, 26 April 2015: Final Report*. Warsaw: OSCE-ODIHR, 29 June 2015.

⁴ S. Bulekbaev & E. Inkarbaev, “Evraziistvo kak Ideologiya Gosudarstvennosti,” *Evraziiskoe Soobshchestvo* 1 (2002): 7.

⁵ Luca Anceschi, “Regime-building, identity-making and foreign policy: neo-Eurasianist rhetoric in post-Soviet Kazakhstan,” *Nationalities Papers* 42 (2014): 741-44.

⁶ Murat Laumulin & Farkhod Tolipov, “Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan: A race for leadership?,” *Security Index: A Russian Journal on International Security* 16 (2010): 47.

⁷ See, on this note, Edward Schatz, “Access by accident: Legitimacy claims and democracy promotion in authoritarian Central Asia,” *International Political Science Review* 27 (2006): 270-1.

⁸ Régis Genté, “Le Kazakhstan ou la géopolitique de l’eurasisme,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 2010.

⁹ For the full text of the Moscow speech, see: Nursultan A. Nazarbaev, “Vystuplenie Prezidenta RK N.A. Nazarbaeva v Moskovskom Gosudarstvennom Universitete M.V. Lomonosova, 29 marta 1994 g.,” in *Prezident N.A. Nazarbaev i sovremennyyi Kazakhstan – N.A. Nazarbaev i vneshnyaya politika Kazakhstana (Tom III)*, ed. B.K. Sultanov., (Almaty: KISI, 2010) 210-5. All (direct and indirect) quotes of the speech made in this section are extracted from the above source.

¹⁰ On Kazakhstan’s official perceptions on the collapse of the Rouble zone, the event that brought to the fore Nazarbaev’s disillusion with the CIS, see: Rawi Abdelal, “Contested currency: Russia’s rouble in domestic and international politics,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 19 (2003), particularly pp. 66-9.

¹¹ Paul Kubicek, “Regionalism, nationalism and Realpolitik in Central Asia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 49 (1997): 642-3; Golam Mostafa, “The concept of ‘Eurasia’: Kazakhstan’s Eurasian policy and its implications,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 4 (2013): 160-70.

¹² A. Tarakov, ‘Evraziistvo – eto put’ v vysokium tselyam’, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, 18 April 2001.

¹³ On the associative patterns that have come to define Eurasian multilateralism in the post-Crimea years, see: Vsevolod Samokhvalov, “Ukraine between Russia and the European Union: Triangle revisited,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 67 (2015): 1371-93; Rilka Dragneva & Kataryna Wolczuk, *Ukraine between the EU and Russia: The Integration Challenge*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2015, particularly pp. 63-82.

¹⁴ Richard Sakwa & Mark Webber, “The Commonwealth of Independent States, 1991-1998: Stagnation and Survival,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 51 (1999): 379-415.

¹⁵ This theme was also frequently addressed in many presidential *poslaniya* of the mid-1990s, when Nazarbaev continuously underlined the importance that linkages with Russia held *vis-à-vis* Kazakhstan’s international dealings. See, on this note: Thomas Ambrosio & William A. Lange, “Mapping Kazakhstan’s geopolitical code:

An analysis of Nazarbayev's presidential addresses, 1997-2014," *Eurasian Geography & Economics* 55 (2014): 537-59.

¹⁶ Yelena N. Zabortseva, *Russia's Relations with Kazakhstan – Rethinking Ex-Soviet Transitions in the Emerging World System* (London: Routledge, 2016), 58-101.

¹⁷ Anceschi, "Regime-building", 735-41.

¹⁸ On the EvrAzEs, see: Zhenis Kembayev, *Legal Aspects of the Regional Integration Processes in the Post-Soviet Area* (Berlin-London: Springer, 2009), 129-67; Adel Galiakberov & Adel Abdullin, "Theory and practice of regional integration based on the EurAsEC model (Russian point of view)," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 5 (2014): 116–21.

¹⁹ Zakon.kz, "Vystuplenie Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan N. Nazarbaeva na mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii «Strategiya Kazakhstan - 2030 v deistvii» (Astana 11 oktyabr 2005 g.)" http://www.zakon.kz/site_main_news/65196-vystuplenie-prezidenta-respubliki.html.

²⁰ Julian Cooper, "The development of Eurasian economic integration," in *Eurasian economic integration: Law, policy and politics*, ed. R. Dragneva & K. Wolczuk, (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2013). 16.

²¹ Angela E. Stent, "Restoration and revolution in Putin's foreign policy," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60 (2008): 1103-1089-106.

²² On the foreign policy of the first Putin Administration, and its Eurasianist outlook more precisely, see: Roy Allison, "Strategic reassertion in Russia's Central Asia policy," *International Affairs* 80 (2004): 277-93; Matthew Schmidt, "Is Putin pursuing a policy of Eurasianism?," *Demokratizatsiya* 13 (2005): 87-99; Natalia Morozova, "Geopolitics, Eurasianism and Russian foreign policy under Putin," *Geopolitics* 14 (2009): 667-86.

²³ Nowhere was this proposition more relevant than in the energy sector, as argued in: Bertil Nygren, "Putin's Use of Natural Gas to Reintegrate the CIS Region," *Problems of Post-Communism* 55 (2008): 3-15.

²⁴ N.A. Nazarbaev, "Vystuplenie Prezidenta RK N.A. Nazarbaev na vneocherednom zasedanii Mezhgosudarstvennogo Soveta EvrAzEs", in Sultanov, op. cit., pp. 264-7. All (direct and indirect) quotes of the speech made in this section are extracted from the above source.

²⁵ This is how Nursultan Nazarbaev described Russia at the Alma-Ata summit of late 1991. See: "Vystuplenie N.A. Nazarbaeva", *Kazhstanskaya Pravda*, 24 December 1991, p. 1.

²⁶ Roy Allison, "Regionalism, regional structures and security management in Central Asia," *International Affairs* 80 (2004): 463-83.

²⁷ Vitaly I. Naumkin, "Russian policy toward Kazakhstan," in *Thinking Strategically: The Major Powers, Kazakhstan, and the Central Asian Nexus*, ed. R. Legvold (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 59.

²⁸ Lena Jonson, *Vladimir Putin and Central Asia* (London: IB Tauris, 2006), 99-103.

²⁹ Vladimir V. Putin, "Novyi integratsionnyi proekt dlya Evrazii – budushchee, kotoroe rozhdaetsya segodniya," *Izvestiya*, 3 October 2011.

³⁰ Paul Pryce, "Putin's third term: The triumph of Eurasianism?," *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 13 (2013): 25-43; Alexander Lukin, "Eurasian integration and the clash of values," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 56 (2014): 43-60; Ray Silvius, "Eurasianism and Putin's embedded civilizationalism," in: *The Eurasian Project and Europe – Regional Discontinuities and Geopolitics*, ed. D. Lane & V. Samokhvalov (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 75-88.

³¹ Edward Schatz & Elena Maltseva, “Kazakhstan’s authoritarian ‘persuasion’,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 28 (2012), particularly pp. 49-52.

³² N.A. Nazarbaev, “Evraziiskii Soyuz: ot idea k istorii budushchego,” *Izvestiya*, 25 October 2011.

³³ For the full draft, see: “Vystuplenie Prezidenta RK N.A. Nazarbaeva v Moskovskom Gosudarstvennom Universitete imeni M.V. Lomonosova,” http://www.akorda.kz/ru/page/page_216601_vystuplenie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazakhstan-n-a-nazarbaeva-v-moskovskom-gosudarstvennom-universit. All (direct and indirect) quotes of the speech made in this section are extracted from the above source.

³⁴ Dosym Satpaev, “Kazakhstan and the Eurasian Economic Union: The view from Astana,” http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_kazakhstan_and_the_eurasian_economic_union_view_from_astana395.

On the domestic impact of EEU accession, see: Luca Anceschi & Paolo Sorbello, “Kazakhstan and the EEU: The rise of Eurasian scepticism,” *OpenDemocracy Russia*, 15 May 2014.

³⁵ Joanna Lillis, “Kazakhstan and Russia trading punches in Import-Export row,” *EurasiaNet*, 16 April 2015. On the general correlation between external economic forces and EEU development see: Ruslan Dzarasov, “The global crisis and its impact on the Eurasian Economic Union,” *East European Politics & Society* [doi: 10.1080/23745118.2016.1171272].

³⁶ The official English language translation of the controversial comments made by Putin at the Seliger National Youth Forum in August 2014 is retrievable at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46507>. All (direct and indirect) quotes of the speech made in this section are extracted from the above source.

³⁷ Nate Schenkkan, “A shot across the bow: The biggest thing in Kazakh-Russian relations in years,” *Registan*, 30 August 2014.

³⁸ Marlene Laruelle, “Kazakhstan’s posture in the Eurasian Union: In search of serene sovereignty,” *Russian Analytical Digest* 165 (2015).

³⁹ For an appropriately placed contextualisation of Kazakhstan’s response to the Selinger comments, and its correlation to the 550th jubilee of the Kazakh khanate, see: Joanna Lillis, “Kazakhstan: Statehood celebrations remind citizens who’s boss,” *EurasiaNet*, 13 October 2015.

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