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Actorness of Regional Organizations in an Authoritarian Context
A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract:
The paper aims to provide a theoretical framework for studying actorness of regional organizations created by authoritarian countries. It serves as a conceptual foundation for a DFG project co-led by the authors in 2021-2023 and focusing on studying the behavior and the functioning of Eurasian regional organizations. While the literature traditionally assumes that authoritarianism and actorness of regional organizations are incompatible, we take a more nuanced perspective on this question. The paper discusses possible determinants for the emergence of actorness, in particular in the post-Soviet Eurasia. It also introduces the concept of back-door actorness, which could be particularly relevant in the authoritarian context.

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Introduction

Understanding the role and the functioning of regional organizations (ROs) established by authoritarian states became a topic of increasing recent scholarly attention. Most studies concentrate on the ability of these organizations to contribute to the stabilization of authoritarian regimes or to limiting the diffusion of democracy (Libman and Obydenkova 2018a; Kneuer et al. 2019; Obydenkova and Schmitter 2020; Debre 2021a, 2021b). Indeed, in some parts of the world like the post-Soviet Eurasia (Ambrosio 2008; Allison 2008; Roberts 2017; Russo and Stoddard 2018; Libman and Vinokurov 2018; Libman and Obydenkova 2018b; Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Lemon and Antonov 2020) and the Middle East (Kamrava 2012; Beck 2015; Magued 2019; Zumbrägel und Demmelhuber 2020), authoritarian regionalism is of profound importance. At the same time, the theoretical understanding of the functioning of authoritarian ROs remains limited; it is partly driven by the fact that substantial part of the flourishing literature on comparative regionalism (Hurrell 1995; Hettne and Söderbaum 2000; Katzenstein 2005; Acharya 2007; Koschut 2017; Söderbaum 2016a) devised its theoretical argumentation based on the cases of ROs created by democratic countries. This leads to the emergence of several important theoretical puzzles, which require scholarly investigation.

The aim of this paper is to present one of these puzzles and subsequently discuss a theory-driven approach towards studying authoritarian regionalism empirically dealing with this puzzle. We will concentrate on the specific example of Eurasian regionalism, which emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union; yet the fundamental question we ask in this paper is relevant for other examples of authoritarian regionalism as well. Eurasia is, however, a very attractive case for studying the phenomenon we are interested in due to the multiplicity of authoritarian ROs in this part of the world, heterogeneity of their functions and performance and complex interrelations between individual ROs (Libman 2019a).

Theorizing of this paper is inspired, in particular, by the experience of seven largest Eurasian ROs in both economic and security domains: the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (**CAREC**), the Commonwealth of Independent States (**CIS**), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (**CSTO**), the Eurasian Economic Union (**EAEU**), the Economic Cooperation Organization (**ECO**), the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development **GUAM** and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (**SCO**).

Eurasian regionalism has received relatively little attention in the scholarly debate and was primarily investigated in the area studies research rather than in comparative regionalism studies. There are two reasons for it. One is the traditional perception of many Eurasian organizations as being primarily **tools** of Russian foreign policy as a regional hegemon. Eurasian organizations, from this perspective, are created by Russia and used instrumentally to achieve specific objectives (which may change over time). Another is the deep **scepticism** of the ability of authoritarian states to create a functioning RO at all (Mansfield et al. 2000, 2002). From this point of view, authoritarian ROs are likely to remain defunct and thus do not warrant detailed scholarly investigation.

Our study aims to critically examine both traditional perspectives on the Eurasian regionalism, asking whether and to what extent Eurasian ROs possess a degree of independent **actorness**. Answering this question requires more than just empirical research on the functioning of these organizations (which is still very limited; most studies focus on the role Eurasian regionalism plays in the rhetoric of Russia and other major regional actors); one potentially needs to **reconceptualize** the very notion of actorness, which was developed in the context of democratic ROs and may travel to an authoritarian context only with a number of reservations. Furthermore, we aim at investigating the factors, which trigger the variation in the actorness of Eurasian ROs. We intend to explore the relevance of **overlapping nature** of Eurasian RO membership on actorness. Specifically, we look at the role of factors leading to the emergence of overlapping ROs (e.g. venue shopping by states) and their effects on the functioning of the RO 'spaghetti bowl'. We intend to explain how **RO-RO relations** influence the actorness of Eurasian ROs. Which factors drive these relations and what are the consequences?

Studying actorness of the Eurasian ROs is the primary goal of the DFG-funded research project the authors of this paper are launching in August 2021. This paper introduces the conceptual framework, which will serve as the basis for the empirical research within the framework of this project and provides the basis for studying actorness of ROs in the authoritarian Eurasian context.

Economic and Security Regionalism in Eurasia

Eurasian regionalism can be roughly divided into two spheres: economic and security one (Hancock and Libman 2016).[1] The envisioned project should cover both policy fields, and both of them are relevant for the theorizing of this article. Whereas Collins (2009) argues that cooperation is much more likely in security than economics due to the authoritarian nature of Eurasian states, Libman and Vinokurov (2012a) contend that the early 1990s' focus on economic reforms dictated the economic rhetoric of many Eurasian ROs.

For both policy fields, research on Eurasian regionalism leaves substantial gaps unresolved. Regarding **economic regionalism**, there is an overall lack of information on supranational decision-making processes, especially in the large EAEU bureaucracy. With some very limited exceptions (Staeger and Bobocea 2018), we know little about how EAEU bureaucratic apparatus functions, how decisions are made and which goals do bureaucrats pursue. Meanwhile, research gaps in **security regionalism** pertain to (limited) peace and security contributions, non-interference and 'virtual' security contributions (Laumulin 2012; Lenz and Marks 2016; Russo and Gawrich 2017). In addition, the effect of disparate military facilities as part of bureaucratic concerns is understudied, e.g. in the CSTO and CIS (Norberg 2013, p. 6).

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[1] We acknowledge that interaction is present in other areas as well, e.g., civil aviation or railroads, but focus on economy and security as, first, they constitute relatively broad areas of cooperation, and second, the findings will make a valuable contribution to advancing comparative regionalism literature (where security and economy also feature prominently).

In what follows, we briefly summarize the main gaps in the existing scholarship on Eurasian regionalism motivating our research framework.

Economy: In this policy field, three major contradictions can be identified, which have to be analyzed and understood in order to study the Eurasian regionalism. The first and the most fundamental one is between the declared goals of regionalism and the actual functions regional organizations could assume. Eurasian regionalism has been one of the most profound examples of major implementation gaps of regional agreements: while they are much smaller in the EAEU than in the predecessor organizations, it is still questionable whether the EAEU will actually achieve the objectives it declared (Libman 2020). Most other Eurasian ROs with declared economic goals have very little practical output. At the same time, since early 1990s, new economic ROs were created over and over again, typically emulating the organization and the institutions of the EU. Gray refers to this as 'zombie' regionalism (Gray 2018). Explaining the repeated reestablishment of ROs even in spite of poor performance of their predecessors is of paramount importance for understanding the Eurasian regionalism.

Economic focus of regionalism, furthermore, frequently goes hand in hand with emulating the EU institutions, and it is to some extent the case in Eurasia – especially the EAEU seems to be open to style itself as a Eurasian version of the European Union (Libman 2019b). This emulation calls for critical discussion and investigation. Jupille et al. use a sociological approach (Jupille et al. 2013), arguing that replications of EU regionalism represent a case of 'downloading the global script' of the only normatively acceptable alternative to the design of economic ROs (see on the concept of downloading e.g. Börzel & van Huellen 2015). Concurrently, however, some regions provide examples of alternative institutional designs. Asian economic regionalism, for example, evolved from an idea of 'open regionalism' (Bergsten 1997) to the contemporary approach focusing on the implementation of individual projects rather than the creation of common norms (Bhattacharyay 2010). Another alternative is what Hancock refers to as 'plutocratic regionalism' (Hancock 2009). In this case, authority is not delegated to a supranational or intergovernmental body but to the most powerful member of the RO. Finally, the Belt and Road Initiative is essentially setting a new format for regional cooperation, again void of rigid institutional structures and commitment to rules and norms typical for the EU.

While conventional economics literature on regionalism emphasizes trade integration as the first step for any RO to take (starting from a free trade area design), it is not clear how this approach fits the diverse challenges in other parts of the world. Eurasia, for example, already has a de-facto common regional labor market established though mass migration to more prosperous Russia and Kazakhstan; all the while, energy-exporting Eurasian countries feature only limited trade ties. Does this indicate that Eurasian regionalism should still initiate with trade or focus elsewhere?

An even more interesting question is whether regionalism with declared economic goals can actually follow a very different objective (Vinokurov & Libman 2017). For example, economic integration can be used as a pretext to justify mutual support of authoritarian regimes; in this

case, the only reason why ROs refer to the economy is that it is a 'legitimate' policy field, which makes it more difficult to criticize authoritarian cooperation. Economic integration can also be used as a tool to provide side-payments to political allies (Davis and Pratt 2021).

All three issues (the deviation of de-facto functioning of ROs from their de-jure mandates; the contradiction between 'downloading' the EU model and alternative institutional designs; and the need to follow the traditional sequence of steps of regionalism as outlined by Balassa) are crucial for Eurasian regionalism. Economic rhetoric in Eurasia does not necessarily coincide with the actual regional integration practices regarding non-economic objectives (e.g. a widely discussed issue for the EAEU), where experiments with different forms of institutional organization are abundant. This ranges from imitating the EU to varieties of plutocratic regionalism or the a-la carte regionalism of the CIS or the new ideas of the flexible Greater Eurasian Partnership modelled after the BRI.

The question for us is how these issues correlate to the actorness of ROs. Actorness, as we will argue, is not achieved by implementing the de-jure organizational agenda or merely copying the EU institutions in spite of the substantially different context. However, research on alternative strategies of achieving actorness is almost absent.

Security: The analysis of regional security organizations in Eurasia furthers a perception of "security arrangements in a given region, institutionalized through regional and sub-regional organizations that share understandings, rules, and practices in the security realm" (Kacowicz & Press-Barnathan 2016: 299). Recent developments in the study of regionalism are similarly reflected in this interpretation of regional security in line with the prevailing trend to theorize security cooperation in regional spaces amid the framework of "new regionalism" (see e.g. Kelly 2007). These approaches explore the role of power in shaping regions and the importance of ideational and normative elements binding states together at the regional level (Buzan & Waever 2003; e.g. Lake & Morgan 2007). One key contribution from recent comparative regionalism research is the application of intricate analytical frameworks for a comparative assessment of regional security organizations or regional security governance across different regions (Tavares 2010; Kirchner & Domínguez 2011; Acharya 2012; Breslin & Croft 2012; Aris & Wenger 2014). However, to what extent such frameworks might apply to the autochthonous Eurasian regional security institutions has rarely been scrutinized (Weiffen et al. 2016; Russo & Gawrich 2017).

We identify three core features of Eurasian security regionalism, which are crucial for studying actorness of regional security organizations. Firstly, there is a palpable tension between an authoritarian country's preference to preserve its sovereignty (see on broader discussions Acharya & Johnston 2007) and the will to react to security risks in a cooperative but intergovernmental manner, without being too obliged to support each other. What is evident is that the protection of state security is the overarching aim. In contrast to the economic realm, plutocratic regionalism (i.e. delegation to the most powerful member) is not probable in the security field. This goes hand in hand with the second feature, namely the rejection of broader human security norms in favor of a focus on limited hard security issues oriented towards new

risks, e.g. anti-terrorism measures (see e.g. some findings on African security regionalism Hentz et al. 2009; Söderbaum & Tavares 2009). Finally, we will have to investigate, how far the superficial *emulation* of western-led security organizations, like NATO, as well as non-western organizations, is an explanation for the actorness of Eurasian security organizations.

Table 1 summarizes the key contradictions and research issues of Eurasian regionalism our literature review has identified.

Table 1: Eurasian Regionalism in the Policy Fields of Economy and Security

Economy	Security
Economic forcus vs. non-economic goals	State sovereignty vs. deep security cooperation
Focus on trade vs. non-trade policies	Hard security versus human security
Emulation of EU-Institutions/policies	Emulation of western-led ROs (e.g. NATO)

On top of that, we need to highlight two crucial features of Eurasian regionalism, research has to take into account. *First,* we perceive the post-Soviet regional integration trajectories as a category of **holding-together regionalism**. This perspective emphasizes a substantial distinction to other regional integration projects, which share the common characteristic of assuming a particular *process* towards *the emergence of regionalism*. On the contrary, Eurasian states already share a common political *history* and have demonstrated a high degree of economic, political and cultural interdependencies. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, new regional organizations attempted to preserve facets of the common institutional frame (Libman & Vinokurov 2012a). Thus, Eurasian ROs inherited a kind of *Soviet legacy* with substantial repercussions for both the positions and interests of the supranational bureaucracy (Libman & Vinokurov 2012b) which we will explicitly take into account.

Second, as already mentioned, Eurasia is a region with a pronounced **power asymmetry** reflected in the design of the ROs and the positions of its members. Russia is unquestionably a regional hegemon and in many cases is the only presence, which unites individual Eurasian countries in economic or security dimensions (both in ROs created under Russian leadership and explicitly to oppose Russia, like the GUAM). Thus by studying Eurasia, we can discover whether and how ROs in hegemonic regions can have a policy impact and how **power asymmetry** affects the strategies of bureaucrats and small countries and the actorness of ROs. Relatedly, we seek to analyze how power maximizing approaches in Eurasia lead to member state resistance (Hurrell 1995; Acharya 2007).[2] It will also allow us to contribute to the growing

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[2] We acknowledge that China also plays an important role for many Eurasian countries. Unlike Russia, China appears less interested in creating formal ROs (rather, it uses more flexible formats, like the BRI, without clear membership, institutions and bureaucracy). Furthermore, it is primarily occupied with creating common infrastructures and developing trade ties, often through informal networks rather than formal organisations. Thus, Chinese influence on the Eurasian ROs' design is indirect as it affects the willingness of other countries to join certain ROs by constraining or enhancing their foreign economic ties. With some exceptions: China is one of two

scholarship on how emerging or sustained regional powers reproduce (or cede) influence in their region, which role ROs can play in this context and whether the development of ROs with their own actorness can limit this goal or be conducive to it (see Ebert and Flemes 2018 for a comparative analysis of this issue).

These features of Eurasian regionalism play the central role in developing the concept of actorness and in devising empirical strategy presented in this paper, as it will be shown in what follows.

Conceptualising Actorness

Eurasian regionalism is often marginalized in theoretical and applied policy research for two reasons: the apparent poor performance of Eurasian ROs and the aforementioned predominant focus on Russia as the key power in RO designs. For example, Allison suggests the existence of a kind of **virtual regionalism**, while identifying the ambitious goals of member states, which failed to materialize (Allison 2008). Similarly, Wirminghaus refers to an **ephemeral regionalism** in Eurasia (Wirminghaus 2012).

The situation changed somewhat with the increased attention paid to the Eurasian regional organizations' ability to contribute to the stabilization of authoritarian rule in the region. This new point of view allowed Eurasian regionalism to become an important part of the debate on what Söderbaum refers to as '**regime-boosting**' (Söderbaum 2016b). This strategy encompasses the effort by the 'gravity centers' of authoritarian rule (Kneuer & Demmelhuber 2016) to insulate other autocracies from the democratizing influence of the West, to reduce the likelihood of consolidation of liberal democracy (Davies 2018) or even to encourage the authoritarian trajectory of regime transition (von Soest 2015). Regime-boosting literature, however, rarely discusses the specific mechanisms through which ROs (not merely the authoritarian 'gravity pole' themselves through bilateral relations) can promote authoritarianism. Such views go hand in hand with the primary focus on Russia's unilateral strategies and geostrategic aims within its near abroad (Tolstrup 2015; Way 2015) and within Eurasian ROs (e.g. Willerton et al. 2015). This line of reasoning also expects other countries to merely comply with the Russian demands based on foreign policy considerations or to attempt to balance Russian influence with that of other powers or to resist Russia. As such, the study of ROs in Eurasia quickly turns into the study of the extent to which Russia dominates individual Eurasian countries and neglects their regional organizations.

We argue, however, that despite the fact that Eurasian regionalism shows a "major implementation gap" as well as an "unclear self-perception" (Hancock & Libman 2016) and the justified pessimism about the capacities of the Eurasian ROs to perform an integrative function (Allison 2008), it is misleading to dichotomize the views on Eurasian regionalism to

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key members of the SCO (which developed through bargaining between China and Russia with partly diverging ideas about its design) and there is a project of 'conjunction' of the BRI and the EAEU, which we intend to address while studying RO-RO relations in Eurasia.

either the issue of Russian dominance or the imitation of Western (mainly EU's) international institutions without any actual substance or policy impact. Rather, the extent to which ROs have an actual policy impact or merely comply with the Russian policy pressure should be the subject of an empirical investigation. In a nutshell, the empirical investigation based on the conceptual framework presented in this paper intends to **verify**, if **ROs possess their own actorness** or **simply function as channels** for **Russian foreign policy**.

Research on RO actorness emerged in the context of the EU, whereas other ROs still remain understudied (Drieskens 2017). Departing from Sjöstedt's (1977, p. 16) **seminal definition of actorness** as the ability of an RO '*to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system*', a number of approaches to empirically conceptualise and measure actorness have been developed, highlighting the interrelated features an RO should possess to achieve a high quality of actorness (Jupille and Caporaso 1998; Bretherton and Vogler 2006; Wunderlich 2012; Murau and Spandler 2016; Mattheis and Wunderlich 2017; Klose 2018). Applying such concepts to a different world region requires **adaptation** and **refinement** in parts to study regional organizations in authoritarian contexts such as our region of interest, the Eurasian regionalism.

Based on the existing literature, we conceptualize the following features of RO actorness (see in particular Hulse 2014): **(a)** an RO-related **discursive identity** or self-image among elites or epistemic communities; **(b) recognition**, both by other international actors through the RO's global visibility as well as internally through what we call '**back door**' actorness. The latter refers to the "proactive and deliberative" (Sjöstedt 1977) character of the respective ROs within *domestic* bureaucratic politics, where they compete with other domestic agencies; **(c)** the **resources** necessary to achieve policy goals; **(d)** institutionalised **decision-making autonomy** separate from its members countries (including Russia); **(e)** the **cohesion** of actions of individual members (i.e. the convergence of preferences, unity of appearance and adherence to common policies).

These dimensions are not necessarily correlated with each other. In particular, **autonomy** and **cohesion** in Eurasian ROs reveal a certain ambiguity. **Autonomy** requires an understanding of how independent ROs are able to operate from the undisputed Russian regional hegemon. For example, how can Russian compromises with states like Kazakhstan or Belarus within Eurasian ROs be explained? This might be driven by Russia's willingness to ensure the RO's functioning, its perception as primarily symbolic or the pursuit of 'package deals' on matters unrelated to the RO. These compromises could emerge precisely in cases of low **cohesion**, i.e., when there are disagreements between Russia and other states of Eurasia.

To clarify it from the start: we do not doubt that Eurasian ROs are intergovernmental and hardly able to independently designate their own policy. This will certainly limit their autonomy. However (and this is a central point for us), it may be fundamentally misleading to search for the autonomy of ROs in the sense typically used in the democratic context (and especially in case of the EU) at all. Rather, we need to look for new dimensions of autonomy, feasible and realistic in the context we study.

From this point of view, autonomy could emerge through a '**back door**' – not as an institutionalized autonomy, but as the de-facto bargaining power of an RO bureaucracy in relations to other (national) institutions and agencies. Eurasian ROs from this point of view do not necessarily want to emancipate themselves from the authoritarian political leadership of the post-Soviet countries: such policy would be futile and does not fit the bureaucratic culture RO officials socialized in. However, their bureaucrats attempt at becoming independent actors competing for attention and support of authoritarian leaders against other national agencies and administrations. The question then becomes which tools, e.g., the Eurasian Economic Commission bureaucrats could potentially use to strengthen their position in the eyes of Russian or Kazakhstani presidents against their domestic ministries of the economy or of finance? How far can the back-door autonomy go and which tools can be used to actually achieve it? Which policy consequences does the search for the back-door autonomy has?

Most likely, ROs in Eurasia are unable to exercise autonomy in matters of strategic importance – here, national governments are obviously likely to make independent decisions ignoring the RO framework (including Russia, as the recent examples of foodstuff embargos and sanctions against Ukraine show). Yet in numerous issues *below* the level of what is perceived as strategically important, ROs could be able successfully outplay national bureaucracies when they are not united on a certain issue. For example, the Eurasian Economic Commission has repeatedly overruled the decisions of Russian regulatory agencies in defiance of the EAEU framework, which Russia complied with. We claim that different ROs in Eurasia have developed a distinct bargaining power and intend to analyze it.

Based on these considerations, we propose **five indicators** to operationalize the **quality of RO actorness**:

I. Discursive identity: The coherence (or its lack thereof) of a common perception of the essential norms and values of an RO, as identified in discourses among elites and epistemic communities.

II. Material and non-material resources: The scope of capacity-related resources available within an ROs is related to the overall budgets as well as to the seize of the secretariat and hence the number of staff members employed. Non-material resources in addition, related to the level of proficiency of the staff members, their expertise, efficiency as well as the density of the professional network of key officials (which e.g. can be measured through career biographies).

III. Decision-making autonomy: This is crucial for the overall understanding of an RO's quality of actorness and relates to both **formal and informal institutions**. At the level of **formal institutional structures** decision-making regulations (Hooghe 2017), are to be classified, which can either occur by **pooling/sharing** decision-making (Lenz and Marks 2016) or by **delegation**, as "a conditional grant of authority from a principal to an agent" (Hawkins et al. 2006, p. 7).[3] It needs to be acknowledged that bureaucrats follow **informal practices** and might act based on habits formed in previous occupations or by informal incentives set by

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[3] Lenz and Marks 2016 found that the CIS and SCO show low pooling and sharing levels. Yet, this requires a reassessment as ROs are prone to change their decision-making procedures over time.

member states. Although research on informal governance in ROs is growing (Stone 2011), proof of this, especially in Eurasia, still remains limited.

IV. (inside and outside) recognition: This indicator addresses first, an ROs outside acceptance and legitimacy within the larger region and beyond. This might be studied through analyzing the interaction with other relevant ROs as well as with the most relevant non-regional actors (as concerns Eurasia these are mainly the EU and China. Inside recognition in contrast, relates to the already mentioned back-door actorness. This indicator explains an ROs institutional interaction with national bureaucracies, hence the level of acceptance, information flows, rule-based budgetary contributions etc.

V. Cohesion: This indicator is to be understood according to the countries' contributions to and compliance with the norms of the Eurasian ROs.

Linked to this, we identified a number of determinants, which potentially affect the actorness of Eurasian ROs and which we discuss in the following section.

Determinants of Regional Organization's Actorness

Our conceptual framework of this paper includes **five** interdependent **determinants** of Eurasian RO **actorness** (see also *Figure 1*):
(1) the **ideational environment** in which Eurasian ROs evolve (concepts and ideas of regional integration),
(2) the **interests** of **member states**,
(3) the **interests** and **preferences** of the **RO bureaucracy**,
(4) the effects of the **overlapping nature of membership** in **ROs** with **similar goals** and **objectives**,
(5) the effects of **interorganisational relations** between ROs.

Figure 1: Analytical Framework
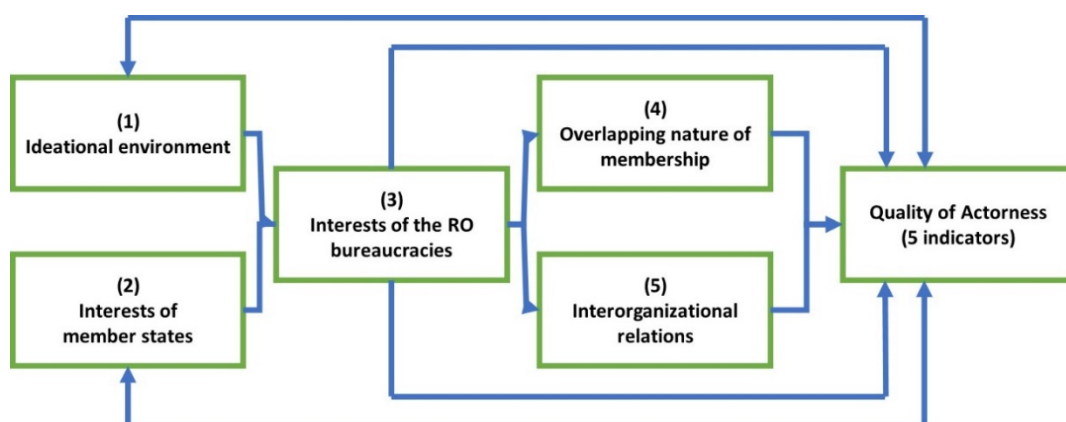
Note: feedback loops not presented for simplicity of the exposition

We consider the ideational environment as well as the interests of member states as the primary determinants, shaping the evolution of the others. In particular, these influence the interests and

preferences of actors within the RO bureaucracies, since staff nomination is largely determined by nation states, and since RO staff members are affected by both their socialisation at home as well as by their perception as international career diplomats.

Hence, on the one hand, determinants 1, 2 and 3 directly influence the overall actorness of an RO. On the other hand, they have a mediated effect through determinant 4 as concerns the overlapping nature of an RO and 5 related to interorganisational relations (e.g. through venue shopping by member states). Our model acknowledges feedback loops between the two primary and three secondary determinants, with e.g., interorganisational relationships changing the attitudes of bureaucrats or the interests of member states.

The remaining part of the section presents the five determinants of actorness in the Eurasian context in greater detail.

Determinant 1 - Ideational environment: We estimate a set of fundamental ideas and concepts as influential in shaping ROs. They affect the willingness of countries to cooperate within an RO and perceive it as legitimate (e.g., perception of a common identity, approaches to nation-building or common criticism of the liberal global order (Darden 2009; Abdelal 2001; Allison 2008, 2018)). Such norms, from a constructivist perspective, might be developed by epistemic communities and elites or through public discourse. They are potentially inherited from regional legacies (in our Eurasian case study region we are addressing those as Soviet legacies) or imported from (sometimes misperceived) discussions on regionalism in other areas (e.g. from the EU). In turn, ROs diffuse norms and rules among member states via concepts of 'acceptable and legitimate state behaviour' (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, p. 33). We will account for both **formal** and **informal norms**, the latter defined as "uncodified, deemed appropriate and employed by a majority of actors" (Hardt 2013, p. 862).

Even though we are aware that ideas and norms are less free floating in authoritarian environments and often prescribed on a top-down basis, we argue that normative legacies at least in parts determine ROs in authoritarian environment and hence, co-exist, with top-down arranged normative bases.

Determinant 2 - Interests of member states: A second crucial factor, explaining regionalism in authoritarian contexts, refers to interests of individual countries, depending on their power-related status in the region (e.g. seize, economic power, geostrategic position, global interconnectedness or its lack thereof etc.). They interplay with determinant 1, the effects of norms and values (e.g. leaders might engage in norm entrepreneurship – as Kazakhstani president Nursultan Nazarbayev did in early 1990s with the initial idea of the Eurasian Union). This should be explored by including realist, rationalist and institutionalist perspectives:

i) Crucial for the **realist perspective** is the power asymmetry in Eurasia. Studies suggest that the establishment of regional institutions requires a leading actor to take the initiative (e.g. Schmitter 2010). In addition, larger states frequently compel IOs to pressure smaller states to cooperate (Stone 2011 refers to this as 'manipulation'). However, ROs can restrict the free exercise of hegemonic power by delegating authority to their institutions ('binding') or

accommodating the hegemon through special compensation ('bandwagoning') (Hurrell 1995). Additionally, studies suggest the establishment of a regional institution necessitates leadership, in other words, an actor who takes the initiative and is willing to provide moral or material resources to promote a given policy (Schmitter 2010). At the same time, large states frequently exert influence on the decision-making bodies of international organizations, which further pressures small states to cooperate (Stone 2011 refers to this as 'manipulation'; see also Urpelainen 2012).

ii) From a **rationalist view**, Eurasian regimes pursue mutual support through cooperation with ROs, but balk at sharing power (Allison 2008, p. 186). Linked to that, we address contradicting evaluations of the aims and effects of **symbolic regime-boosting regionalism**, when autocratic leaders are involved in symbolic or discursive regime-building activities (Söderbaum 2016b, p. 90).

iii) From an **institutionalist perspective**, interests vary substantially between the policy fields. In the economic realm, common infrastructures, energy interdependence, resistance towards global economic pressures, and cultural and linguistic commonalities bind Eurasia together. As for security issues, counterterrorism and border security since 9/11, the aftermath of NATO's mission in Afghanistan and the perceived threat of ISIS recruitment in Central Asia play important roles. It is plausible to assume that **economic** factors produce **holding-together regionalism** and **security** regionalism begets a kind of **virtual regionalism**.

From this perspective, **smaller states** can contribute to an RO's actorness. By pursuing a foreign policy agenda divergent from Russia, smaller countries **transform** Eurasian ROs into **venues** for **debate** and **decision-making**, e.g., Kazakhstan and Belarus' refusal to impose sanctions against Ukraine within the Customs Union in 2014. By doing so, they emancipated the RO decision-making from Russia. Their proactive role clearly requires a more nuanced investigation. As concerns Belarus, this, however, is contradicted by the attempt of Belarus to closely bandwagon with or even subordinate under Russia's foreign policy goals in the aftermath of the revolutionary movement since summer 2020.

At the same time, also hegemons might have interests to boost RO actorness under certain conditions. For example, smaller states may be more interested to join an RO with a stronger, more independent bureaucracy than the one they suspect to be manipulated by the hegemon. As long as the key policy issues remain under control of the hegemon, it may agree to cease control over the RO in other matters.

Determinant 3 - Interests and preferences of the RO bureaucracies: The interaction between countries when designing ROs brings their bureaucracies to life, which in turn are able to influence the ROs' actorness, insofar as they intend to become emancipated from national authorities. Studies on the role of bureaucracies in the Eurasian ROs (shaped by authoritarian regimes) typically disregard two features:

First, the bureaucracies of ROs are **heterogeneous**. Some ROs are indeed used as 'places of exile' for former politicians (mostly within the CIS), but others (like the EAEU's predecessor,

the Customs Union) attract more prominent political actors. What becomes clear is that the national strategy of nominating delegates to post-Soviet ROs varies significantly with some ROs consisting of more active bureaucracies than others. Furthermore, there are differences in the functioning and organization of individual agencies among the ROs themselves (e.g. between the EAEU's court and its Economic Commission or between the CIS's industrial councils).

Second, as already mentioned above, in many cases, a more interesting aspect of the analysis is less the emancipation of bureaucracies from national authorities (as is a common perspective in EU studies), but rather how the bureaucracies of ROs compete with **other national agencies** for the support of political leaders. Again, ministers of the Eurasian Economic Commission certainly do not aspire to liberate their office from national leadership. On the contrary, evidence suggests that in cases of doubt, they prefer to shift decisions to the heads of state. Yet, RO bureaucracies may compete with Russian ministers for the support and attention of the Russian president.

We suggest to apply two theoretical perspectives to explain bureaucratic behaviour. The **public choice** theory on international organizations (Vaubel 1986) we intend utilize treats bureaucracies as **rent-seeking agents**, pursuing an expansion of power and control over the RO's budget, employing the different available tools depending on the design and functioning of the ROs. An RO's bureaucracy can focus on developing the economic agenda (e.g. the Eurasian Economic Commission), or pay attention to improving the RO's ability to serve in regime-boosting (e.g. the CIS Interparliamentary Assembly, which justifies authoritarian practices through its Observer Missions (see Russo 2018). Furthermore, the preferences of international bureaucrats hinge upon the comparative career prospects within national governments and ROs. For example, the Eurasian Economic Commission and the CIS-Interstate Aviation Commission provide more attractive job opportunities than the ECO or the CIS Secretariat.

Alternatively, **ideational factors** can drive the behavior of bureaucrats. As already noted, Eurasian organizations differ substantially in terms of the norms and values. These values are to some extent determined by the member states (and codified in the treaties and similar documents we plan to study), but they also are influenced by the norms and values of bureaucrats themselves. These bureaucrats could share certain ideological premises: Sergei Glazyev, the first head of the Customs Union Commission, was as an anti-Western Russian politician advanced his agenda in support of Eurasian regionalism (see Aslund 2013); at the same time, other key actors of the Customs Union and the EAEU bureaucracy had a strong pro-European stance and tried to follow it in their activity. Ideological differences do not necessarily go along the 'pro-Western / anti-Western line' though. And, in addition to well defined ideologies, informal norms (like the general perception of the bureaucrats of their position vis-à-vis national governments and political decision-makers: e.g., how much autonomy do they consider as 'acceptable' for them to exercise) are also important.

This approach will be exercised while analyzing both the economic and security related realms of cooperation. Within **economic regionalism**, supranational bureaucracy is important, especially concerning the EAEU given the size of its bureaucracy. As information regarding the work of its bureaucracy is sparse, we propose the following research questions: Who are the primary authorities to whom EAEU bureaucrats shift the burden of decision-making? Second, how cohesive is the EAEU bureaucracy? Here, we take into account the recent reforms concerning country quotas among staff members of the Eurasian Economic Commission and the potential side-effect of 'placeholder' positions without substantial functions.

Within **security regionalism**, there is a pervasive pessimism towards the causal link between institutional design on the one hand, and peace and security contributions on the other (Lenz & Marks 2016). Even Russian publications allude to a "virtual security" (Laumulin 2012) vis-à-vis the CSTO's institutions. Its Peace Keeping Force and Command and Control System is dominated by Russians due to an "asymmetry of force" (Norberg 2013: 6). However, the selected ROs demonstrate a certain amount of diversity. The CIS is comparably better equipped, revealing a more adequate command structure and undertakes joint military exercises. Nevertheless, it is a Russian dominated RO with huge capacity imbalances between Russia and its other member states. In contrast, the GUAM allows us to examine a Eurasian RO's actorness *without* Russian participation, and based on a soft security approach, which the CSTO and the SCO lack. Finally, within the SCO, Russian geostrategic interests compete with that of China and more recently with newly joined India and Pakistan. A common characteristic is the importance of non-interference in all these ROs, which indicates an aim of collective, not cooperative, security against external threats, which would include interventionist institutions (Russo & Gawrich 2017). Nevertheless, as with the RO bureaucracies, there is limited comparative knowledge regarding security-related instruments like joint command structures, joint military exercises or armament coordination. The identified research gap will be addressed within this project.

Determinant 4 - Overlapping nature of membership: The prolific overlapping membership in several ROs (see Figure 2) provides states with opportunities to **forum shop**, while **regime shifting** explains the long-term tendency to move negotiations to alternative, multilateral institutions with more favourable mandates and decision-making rules (Busch 2007; Morse and Keohane 2014; Gómez-Mera 2015).

RO overlap erodes the clarity of legal obligations, generating a **strategic ambiguity** in how to interpret an agreement (Alter and Meunier 2009, p. 17), which states exploit to avoid committing to a single trajectory. Furthermore, new ROs might neutralise older ROs to protect members from dominance, neglect, or abuse by the more powerful. They create new context-specific norms to challenge existing institutions and produce **strategic inconsistency** (Raustiala and Victor 2004).

Table 2: Effects of Overlapping Regionalism

| Member state strategies	Forum shopping
	Regime shifting
	Strategic ambiguity
	Strategic inconsistency

Source: Based on studies by Weiffen et. al./ Russo; Gawrich (Weiffen et al. 2016; Russo & Gawrich 2017).

Proceeding from the country-level preferences concerning potential costs and benefits of RO-memberships, we *first* explore the factors, driving **member states' strategies** within **security** and **economy** integration. *Second*, we attempt to understand the **role of Soviet legacies** and **power asymmetry** as two specific features of Eurasian regionalism, which influence the countries' strategy within and between the ROs. Particularly important is whether and how the multiplicity of ROs can balance Russia's influence (or maybe that of other larger countries, like Kazakhstan). For example, the coexistence of multiple ROs could offer countries the opportunity to reduce the costs of potential Russian pressure through e.g. *forum shopping*. Furthermore, since the decision-making mechanisms and extent of credibility of commitments in various ROs also differs, countries could select the venues most appropriate for assigning particular tasks.

In terms of **historical legacies,** the countries face a particularly interesting forum opportunity: they can (a) use 'traditionally' structured ROs with Russia at the core as the simplest approach to reproduce pre-existing patterns of interactions in Eurasia, (b) focus on sub-regional ROs without Russian hegemonic power or (c) focus on ROs including extra-regional players (China or Turkey), which provide ample opportunities for balancing the Russian influence *and* even provide access to additional resources. However, such transactions may carry heavy costs such as the end of Russian as the lingua franca or the atrophy of informal Soviet practices and relations. Additionally, post-Soviet elites are less experienced in interacting with external partners other than Russia, where the results were more predictable (which predictability decreased after the Russian annexation of Crimea). Furthermore, sub-regional ROs like GUAM could provide the benefit of addressing specific country-related (Moldova and Tajikistan have little in common if one discounts the role of Russia) or sub-regional problems. Still, many post-Soviet sub-regions (like Central Asia) are politically and economically fragmented with stronger political relations with Russia or China than each other.

The country's choices could substantially affect all **dimensions** of **actorness** (cohesion, recognition, authority, autonomy). For example, when facing a bevy of ROs, countries could provide them with more or less *recognition*, as was the case when the ascendency of the EAEU coincided with the decline of interest in the CIS. Hence, the *authority* of an RO is also an outcome of a country's strategic decision to switch preferences between ROs. Finally, an RO's *autonomy* rises or falls depending on member state engagement.

Figure 2: Overlapping Membership in Eurasian ROs

Economy   **Security**
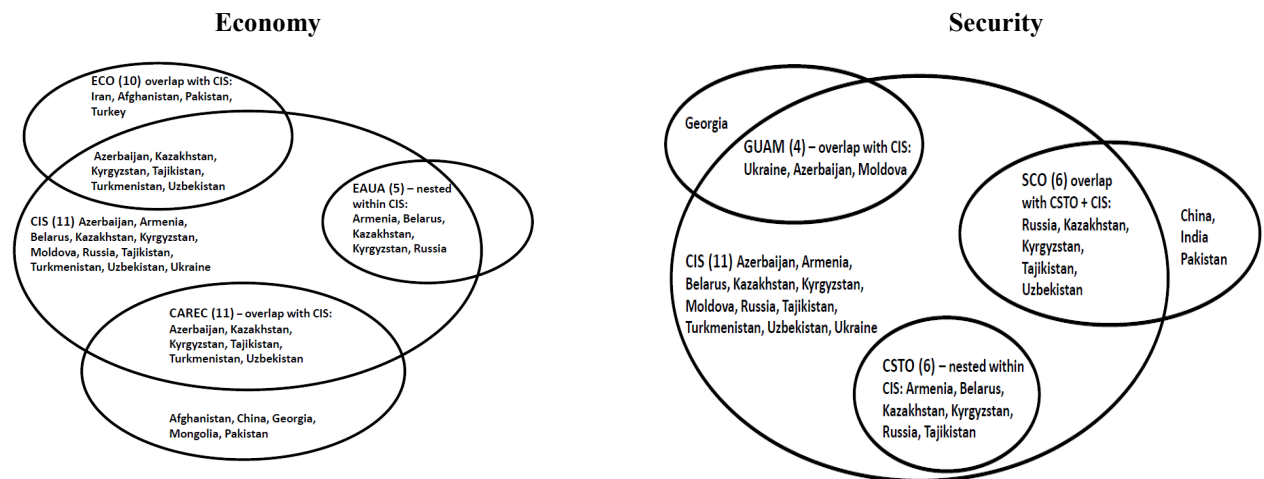
Determinant 5 - Interorganisational relations:

Combining the previous steps of analysis on the design, membership and values of individual ROs and the behavior of their bureaucracies, we proceed to looking at how these factors influence and are influenced by the RO-RO relations. The analysis of relations between international/regional organizations is still an emerging research field (Biermann & Koops 2017b); the proposed approaches have rarely been applied to Eurasian ROs (Biermann 2017). Practically, the relations between ROs are exercised primarily by their bureaucracies (which, in the Eurasian case, due to the widespread overlap of ROs are also closely intertwined – there have been cases of the same institution functioning on behalf of two ROs like the Economic Court of the CIS on behalf of the Eurasian Economic Community before 2010). These bureaucracies are most likely to be strongly influenced by the positions of the member countries (which, ultimately, finance the ROs). The decisions of bureaucracies are driven by the same logics we discussed in the previous sections – from rent-seeking to ideational factors.

IOs or ROs can either cooperate or compete with one another in a given policy domain at a certain point in time. From a rationalist perspective, cooperation between IOs/ROs is more probable in dense political spaces, characterized by high interdependency. Nevertheless, IO/RO interaction is worth examining in a geographical context with less institutionalized frames like Eurasia. From a functionalist interpretation, IO-IO cooperation emerges in cases of expansion in certain functional domains. This process may conflict with other IOs, who have acted within this domain and become (negatively) affected. If this situation is handled positively, this could contribute to *domain consensus* and a cooperative *division of labor*, which may also lead to a collective problem-solving scenario. However, it might also beget rivalry and competition between IOs (Biermann & Koops 2017b). This competition might be explained by an IO's struggle for recognition, authority and autonomy, which could be more pronounced in conditions of asymmetric influence (Keohane 2005 [1984]; Biermann 2015; Biermann & Koops 2017b).

Additional explanations for IO-IO/RO-/RO interaction incorporate either power or resource dependency. The former assumes an asymmetrical relation, while the latter assumes mutual gains from interacting (Jönsson 2017).

Table 3: Modes of IO-IO relations

Inter-organizational relations	Cooperation
	Competition

The relations between ROs in Eurasia are ultimately driven by the identified factors: country preferences, bureaucratic preferences and overlapping memberships. In terms of country preferences, cooperation in ROs can be seen as an attractive economic solution to use the resources at hand. ROs can also utilize their toolbox to reinforce each other's goals. At the same time, countries could prefer rival relations between the ROs to which they belong. E.g. for small countries, a certain degree of rivalry could be tempting if it emancipates them from the influence of the dominant country. However, the leading country may feel compelled to limit RO-RO competition, which could go hand in hand with forum shopping, and increase pressure on small countries (e.g. in the Western part of the CIS before the Ukrainian Euromaidan revolution). Bureaucratic actors could also focus on defending their sphere of influence and their issues from other ROs. In contrast, bureaucratic actors could also be interested in RO-RO cooperation to increase the legitimacy of their overall integration agenda. Finally, regular staff exchange between ROs might foster harmonious relations between the ROs.

On the one hand, cooperation between ROs can increase their actorness (if ROs mutually strengthen one another) or decrease it (if one RO increases its de-facto influence at the expense of another). *On the other hand*, competition between ROs can ruin their actorness by depleting resources, or elevate it if the RO's bureaucracies can obtain greater support from member states.

Again, we expect substantial differences between economic and security regionalism:

Economy: Since the establishment of the EAEU in 2015, **a substantial level of cooperation** has occurred between the EAEU and some smaller economic ROs, in particular the Eurasian Development Bank and the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development. Both organizations complement each other by pursuing a similar agenda, yet by different means – regulation (EAEU) and finance (EDB, EFSD). The EAEU also enjoys relatively harmonious relations with the CIS, as evidenced by the CIS Free Trade Area Agreement to which all EAEU countries are a party.[4] The ECO and CAREC, being focused on much more narrow agenda, display a very limited level of interaction with other Eurasian economic ROs.[5] A decisive factor for the EAEU is its complex relations with the EU. While there have been intensive discussions

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[4] However, important restrictions for Russia after this country imposed sanctions against Ukraine and Moldova show a diverse picture.
[5] E.g. CAREC, instead of developing an encompassing regulatory framework, concentrates on specific trade-facilitating promotion and infrastructural projects instead of developing an encompassing regulatory framework.

about the possibility of cooperation between the two ROs, there is more evidence that the EAEU perceives the EU's agenda in the Eastern neighborhood as a rival (a mutual sentiment according to some EU actors). The EAEU's membership explicitly precludes the signing of an EU Association Agreements. More importantly, the perception of the EAEU as a possible 'power pole' rivaling other ROs is widespread in Russia (Libman 2017).

Our goal is to trace the specifics of cooperation between Eurasian ROs, to understand how external factors[6] and internal relations between countries influence this cooperation or lead to more competition, and ultimately, how IO-IO relations affect the agency of the regional organizations.

Security: Within the field of security, there is a broader **lack of competition** between the selected ROs. The CSTO, which is fully nested within the CIS, was partly founded to evade the diverse security interests in the wider CIS and to address NATO's domain expansion in Afghanistan. However, the CSTO's military resources to date do not deliver fully collective security capacities which could compete with other regional actors. If the recently swelled ranks of the SCO, with India and Pakistan on board, would establish a similar collective security agenda, a certain competition could take place. Yet the non-interventionist and sovereignty-oriented approach of its Asian members would assumingly prove to be a roadblock. Finally, the GUAM, itself advocating a soft security agenda and consisting of three countries with NATO-related agendas (Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova) alongside one multivectoral country (Azerbaijan), can neither become a competing nor an increasingly cooperative RO in the Eurasian security sector.

Concluding Remarks

It remains to summarize the main points of our argument. In this paper, we attempted to provide a conceptual framework for studying actorness of authoritarian ROs and its determinants concentrating on the case of Eurasian regionalism. Literature typically assumes that authoritarian ROs should have very limited actorness; in Eurasia, it should be even more pronounced due to the enormous power asymmetries between post-Soviet countries, making several key Eurasian ROs potentially massively dependent on the Russian foreign policy. In contrast to such mainstream assumptions, we suggest that even in authoritarian hegemonic contexts certain level of actorness is possible, although it potentially manifests itself in a very different way than in democratic ROs (e.g., through the back-door actorness, which should be visible primarily in domestic bureaucratic politics of major member states).

Identifying actorness of authoritarian ROs requires scrutinous empirical investigation of their day-to-day practices and decision-making. This type of research on the functioning of authoritarian regimes is fundamentally difficult (Art 2016; Barros 2016); emulation practices (copying institutions of democratic ROs like the EU for the multitude of reasons) and mismatch

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[6] Such as the global financial crisis, which to an extent led to the establishment of the Customs Union or the imposition of sanctions against Russia.

between official and real objectives authoritarian ROs pursue, makes it even more challenging. In this study, we offered a conceptual framework for studying actorness, including both an approach to describing and measuring it and a set of potential determinants of actorness and as well as their inter-conectedness. In particular, the concept of back-door actorness is important for us, as it broadens our research up for other and unexpected potential areas, where we need to search for actorness of authoritarian ROs. The set of determinants of actorness includes ideational foundation of regionalism; interests of member states and of bureaucracies; but, what is also very important for us, interorganizational relations (RO-RO interaction) and overlapping regionalism.

The paper, as it is conceptual in nature, does not report any empirical findings yet; we aim to use it as the foundation for the empirical investigation to start in autumn 2020 within a DFG-funded project. Thus, we hope to be able to provide tangible evidence on the scope of actorness of authoritarian ROs in Eurasia in the years to come.

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