



# Political Freedoms and Human Rights in Eurasian Economic Union Countries: The Cases of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan

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## **Abstract**

*According to widely held beliefs the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) inaugurated in 2015 is a new twenty first century version of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the EAEU member states are deemed bound to the Russian ‘authoritarian resistance’ and ‘authoritarian’ diffusion’, with little to no chances for democracy promotion. This study focuses the state of human rights and political freedoms in EAEU member states Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia. It represents an attempt to explore the relationship between the Eurasian integration and the state of democracy in EAEU member states. The findings of this study suggest that even the state of democracy has slightly deteriorated in Russia and Kazakhstan and by contrast improved in Armenia since the establishment of the EAEU, there have been no major shifts or considerable changes. That said, it is hard to contend that Eurasian integration has made the EAEU countries less democratic than they would have been otherwise.*

**Keywords:** Eurasian Economic Union, Eurasian integration, human rights, political freedoms, authoritarian resistance.

## **Introduction**

The Eurasian Economic Union founded on January 1, 2015 is an international organization that brings together Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan with the view to fostering regional economic integration. for regional economic integration.

One of the biggest questions is whether the EAEU is merely a regional economic organization? Some observers were quick to treat that as a new twenty first century version of the Soviet Union that would further plunge its member states into the orbit of the Russian authoritarian influence (Hartwell, 2013).

Overall, the Eurasian Union has been widely viewed as a manifestation of growing antagonism between the Russian and European visions of the shared neighborhood (Korosteleva, 2016).

While the EU is largely viewed as peace and democracy promoter, Russia is seen as its ideological rival, that strives to produce autocracies in post-Soviet countries with the view to absorbing them into its ranks.

Thus, the Russian policy towards its ‘near neighborhood’ has been broadly associated with ‘authoritarian resistance’, ‘authoritarian diffusion’ and ‘democracy prevention’ (Von Soest, 2015; Finkel and Brudny, 2012).

Some observers go even further, by contending that the chances of democratization across a vast swath of Eurasia seem slimmer now, than ever before in the face of Russian President Vladimir Putin's crackdown on liberal-democratic forces at home and abroad (Diuk, 2014, p. 83).

Alternatively, other students of the Russian politics have greeted such alarmist claims with skepticism, pointing to the limited reach of authoritarian governments (Brownlee, 2017; Way, 2016). It follows that while Russian actions have periodically promoted instability and secessionist conflict, there is little evidence that such intervention has made post-Soviet countries less democratic than they would have been otherwise (Way, 2016). The reasons range from Russia's inconsistency in its support for autocracy to the fact that post-Soviet countries already have weak democratic prerequisites (Way, 2016).

While previous studies have not identified significant relationship between Russian authoritarianism promotion and regime outcomes in former Soviet countries, the question arises as to whether this relationship has undergone any changes in the EAEU member states amid Russian-led large-scale Eurasian integration. Therefore, this study addresses the following questions: 1. what is the current state of political freedoms and civil liberties in EAEU member states. 2. whether and to what extent has the Eurasian integration affected the state of political freedoms and human rights in EAEU member states? By analyzing the case of Russia, it seeks to find out whether and to what extent the Russian regime outputs get projected onto other EAEU member states.

### **Understanding Eurasian Integration: Geopolitical Dimensions**

According to widely held beliefs, the Russian-led Eurasian integration aims at reorganizing the post-Soviet space and shielding the latter from unwanted Western 'intrusions' (Kaczmarek, 2017; Kirkham, 2016).

A well-informed observer notes that many in Russia have a deep conviction that economic integration represented by the Eurasian Economic Union in its current format could evolve into something bigger – an integrated, Russian-led and globally relevant Eurasia (Popescu, 2014, p. 19). Essentially, it has not been uncommon for the Eurasian Economic Union to be treated as what former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would refer to as “a move to re-Sovietize the region” (Radio Liberty, 2012).

Overall, the EAEU has been widely viewed as a manifestation of the growing antagonism between the Russian and European visions of the shared neighborhood (Korosteleva, 2016). It emerged out of Kremlin's mounting assertiveness towards the European integration in its 'near neighborhood' and can be viewed as an outcome of Russia's substantial othering of the West.

While in early 1990s the West would be treated as a symbol of a high level of socioeconomic development by a significant part of the Russian elite and the wider society, the anti-western attitudes started to pick up steam during Vladimir Putin's presidency. The latter marked a shift from 'liberal ideas' to geopolitical and particularly pragmatic geo-economic realism in the Russian political thinking (Thorun, 2009, p. 28). As a result, instead of treating the West as a "role model" Putin resorted to othering it, thus leading to the establishment of an opposing ideology to the Western/European one based on Russian ethnic nationalism, conservative values and the Russian Orthodox church. Thus, Russia is widely deemed to be defining itself as a rival to the EU with the creation of the Eurasian Union and possibly constructing a Eurasian identity (Stefansson, 2015, pp. 20-21).

Not surprisingly, the 2014 Maidan Revolution in Ukraine has been viewed as a manifestation of "clash of civilizations" between Russia and Europe that heralded the end of the post-Cold war settlement and vanished the hopes of Euro-Russian integration (Shevtsova, 2014). That said, instead of joining the Western civilization, Russia positioned itself as its "Other" and resorted to what Delcour and Wolczuk (2017) refer to as alternative region building or region-spoiling measures in the form of the Eurasian integration (p. 187).

The setbacks endured in the EU-Russia relations over the last decade provoke an inquiry into the rationale behind their conflictual visions that played a part in Europe's othering in Russian political thinking.

Studies show that in early 2000s Russia would not fiercely resist to the EU's rapprochement with its near neighborhood, as it would do when it comes to NATO. Rather, Russia tended to indicate considerable interest in developing partnership with the EU, centering on but not limited to energy and trade (Delcour and Kostanyan, 2014. p. 2).

While the EU granted Russia the role of special 'strategic partner', Brussels and its institutions would be the 'unipole' with Russia envisaged as a recipient of norms, values and best practices promoted by the EU (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2013, pp. 163-164). This was absolutely consistent with Russia's ambition to join the 'community of civilized states' and set up a

comprehensive system of collective security in Europe as an antidote to dividing lines and polarization. Yet, Delcour and Kostanyan note that the partnership developed between the EU and Russia in the 2000s was underpinned by false premises and misperceptions (Delcour and Kostanyan, pp. 2-3). The EU would take for granted the assumption that Russia would unequivocally share its values by adopting the Western liberal standards of democracy and the market economy, and thus becoming a democratic and reliable partner. Meanwhile, the core assumption dominating the Kremlin's political thinking was that the EU's weak security actorness and its low profile in the post-Soviet space would impair its ability to compete with Russia in its neighborhood (Delcour and Kostanyan, 2014, pp. 2-3)

The first major setback in the EU-Russia relations was the introduction of the European Neighborhood Policy in 2004 – largely perceived as detrimental to Russian interests by the Kremlin. Moreover, the fear of losing its influence in its 'backyard' amidst 'color revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine and the EU's alarming engagement, prompted Russia into taking 'preventive' measures. Notably, given their 'anti-post-soviet' nature, there has been a tendency to regard the post-soviet revolutions as major international setbacks to Putin's Russia (Finkel and Brudny, 2012). Russia's efforts at keeping its "near abroad" in the orbit of its authoritarian influence, did not resonate particularly with Georgian and Ukrainian societies, determined to overcome post-soviet authoritarianism and stand up for their "European choice" (Cameron and Orenstein, 2012).

Clearly, the inauguration of the Eastern Partnership in 2008 reinforced Russia's worst fears about the EU's 'expansionist agenda' and put it in the same category as 'hostile' NATO in Kremlin's political thinking. Essentially, by offering Eastern neighbors Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) and Association Agreements (AAs), the EU was deemed to be making significant strides in 'absorbing' them into its ranks.

In response to the EU's integration agenda, Russia resorted to alternative region measures with a view to securing regional hegemony (Delcour and Wolczuk, 2017). Russia's mounting assertiveness has been vividly manifested in its intensifying efforts at promoting its preferred vision of order beyond its borders in the form of Eurasian Economic (Customs) Union launched in 2010.

As a long term project aimed at regaining the Russian control over post-Soviet space, the Eurasian Union was bound to collide with the Eastern Partnership as the European and Russian visions for the 'shared' eastern neighborhood remain self - centered and exclusionary

(Korosteleva, 2016). In effect, the EU and Russia find themselves locked in parallel rather than complementary relations with the ‘shared’ region, each attempting to institutionalize their respective political orders (Korosteleva, 2016).

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine –significantly owing to country’s European choice reveals a profound lack of understanding the region by both the EU and Russia.

When viewed from Brussels, the Eastern Partnership has marked a new phase of the EU’s ‘constructive engagement’ in its neighborhood, with the view to transforming it into an area of democracy, peace and prosperity (Haukkala, 2018, p. 84). Meanwhile, the Kremlin would treat the Eastern Partnership as European intrusion in ‘its sphere of influence’, as for Russia, converging with the *acquis* means a shift away from what ties EaP countries have with Moscow (Delcour and Kostanyan, 2014, p. 3).

It is for these reasons that Putin threw his back behind promoting the Eurasian Union, most vividly by making every effort to ensure Ukraine’s alignment with the union.

Finding itself at the intersection of the exclusionary integration projects the Ukrainian society confirmed its “European choice” and a fervent desire to join the European family of democracies.

In response the Kremlin spared no effort to halt Ukraine’s march toward closer European and wider Euro-Atlantic integration in its tracks (Menon and Rumer, 2015), not least through mobilizing its propaganda apparatus to demonize the Maidan revolution as “coup staged by neo-Nazis and Russophobes” (Putin, 2014).

Shevtsova notes that the pro-EU, democratic movement in Ukraine heightened Putin regime’s fears about its possible spillover into Russia, amid lingering concerns about recurrence of large-scale post-election protests that erupted in 2011 (p. 74). In response, Putin resorted to reinforcing personalistic leadership, sparing no effort to undermine Western influence over its “near neighborhood” (Shevtsova, 2014, p. 74). It follows that the crisis in Ukraine stems from Russia’s struggle to control Ukraine and keep it in the orbit of its authoritarian influence, as opposed to the Ukrainians’ “choice for Europe” (Ibid).

Some observers go even further, by contending that the chances of democratization across a vast swath of Eurasia seem slimmer now, than ever before in the face of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s crackdown on liberal-democratic forces at home and abroad (Diuk, 2014, p. 83). This line of thinking presumes that the Kremlin has a strong interest in ensuring that regional and

global democratic trends do not affect grip on the Russian political system and that the legitimacy of democracy promotion and regime change are subverted (Roberts and Ziemer, 2018, p. 152). Thus, instead of embracing democratic values, Russia is deemed to be posing threats to liberal democracies by rolling back democracy around the world and bringing down democratic governments in its neighborhood and beyond (Ambrosio, 2007).

A question remains as to whether and to what extent the Eurasian integration has influenced the state of political freedoms and human rights in its member countries.

### **Authoritarian Union? Regime Types in Eurasian Economic Union Countries**

The EAEU members share much in common in terms of their post-Soviet authoritarian legacy and weakness of democratic institutions.

As a matter of fact, their post-soviet transition has been marred by a series of authoritarian malpractices, ranging from centralization and personalization of power to extensive crackdown on civil liberties and political freedoms (Freedom House: Russia, 2020). What makes Russia stand out from other post-Soviet countries is that the combination of historical conditions that had created a strong anti-communist consensus in most of Eastern Europe had not taken shape in Russia. Clearly, it would be unrealistic for Russians to treat the Soviet system as an imposition on them by a foreign power or see it as an obstruction to independence (Evans, 2011, p. 47). As a result, there was a lack of a consensus at the elite and popular levels about the desired character of political and economic transformation (Ibid).

There is a broad consensus among the students of Russian politics that the Russian regime – centered around “Putinism” is as a form autocratic rule that is personalistic, conservative and populist (Fish, 2017, p. 61).

Moreover, given the Kremlin’s massive crackdown on political freedoms and civil liberties some observers and human right watchdogs alarm that today Russia is more repressive than it has ever been in the post-Soviet era (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

The situation is not much different in Russia’s ‘near neighbors’ Belarus and Kazakhstan. Lukashenko regime in Belarus has been largely regarded as ‘Europe's last dictatorship’ that seems to be a maverick, isolated from the West and inseparable from the East (Allison, White and Light, 2005; Korosteleva, 2016).

Even the ‘color revolutions’ next door left the Lukashenko regime unchallenged. The European Union’s engagement with Belarus has not led to considerable economic and political reforms, while its absorption into Russia's Eurasian project seems unstoppable.

Similarly, Kazakhstan’s political regime can be best described as a personalistic autocracy, with the ‘father’ of the Kazakhstani nation Nazarbayev being perceived as the single politician capable of meeting the challenges of post-Soviet nation-building (Isaacs, 2010).

Not surprisingly, the Kazakhstani government and constitution concentrate power in the presidency, thus granting former president Nursultan Nazarbayev broad, lifetime authority over a range of government functions (Department of State: Kazakhstan, 2019).

As for the smallest EAEU member Armenia, while, its political system would be long falling into the category of hybrid regimes, the 2018 “Velvet Revolution” sparked optimistic commentaries about country’s gradual transition from competitive authoritarianism to a consolidated democracy.

Even though in contrast to other EAEU members, the Armenian regime is much more liberal, it has been characterized by a series of authoritarian practices, ranging from centralization of power to rampant corruption and erosion of political freedoms.

Notably, “Velvet Revolution”, along with well-administered parliamentary elections that ensured revolution leader Nikol Pashinyan’s landslide victory, have prompted some observers to posit that Armenia is undergoing significant democratic reforms (Grigoryan, 2019)

Nevertheless, while many hoped that like neighboring Georgia, the domestic change would lead to foreign policy shifts and fundamental approximation towards Europe, the Prime Minister was quick to confirm country’s commitment to Eurasian integration (Terzyan, 2019, pp. 101-102). A question remains as to whether and to what extent the new government’s ‘game changing’ agenda is compatible with its full-scale integration into the Russian-dominated and inherently authoritarian Eurasian Union.

### **Political Freedoms in EAEU Countries**

While in democratic regimes political rights and civil liberties, including freedom of the press, freedom of association, and freedom to criticize the government without reprisal, are broadly protected, the authoritarian regimes are characterized by serious violations of this criterion that inevitably creates an uneven playing field between government and opposition.



One of the salient features of the EAEU countries, is weakness of democratic institutions, together with lack of robust political opposition and civil society.

The anti-government protests seem bound to be met with police violence, while journalists and activists can not operate with safety amid massive crackdown on the freedom of expression and brutal suppression of dissent. According to Freedom House reports, the Russian state directly or indirectly owns or controls the mainstays of the media landscape—television stations, most radio stations, many newspapers, and most regional media (Freedom House: Russia, 2020). Even though some space for independent media does exist, particularly online the Russia’s independent media environment remains extremely difficult, with Kremlin controlling the media narrative on politically sensitive issues (Ibid).

Human rights watchdogs have consistently alarmed the Russian authorities’ tendency of using repressive legislation to stifle critical and independent voices online and offline (HRW: Russia, 2019). The government’s efforts at curtailing internet freedom went up to a new level in May, 2019, when Putin signed a law enabling Russian authorities to block access to the internet in Russia, without judicial oversight (Ibid).

Furthermore, in December, 2019 Putin signed a law that endows the Russian government with the right to classify journalists and bloggers as “foreign agents” (The Guardian, 2019). Under the vaguely worded law, Russians and foreigners who work with media or distribute their content and receive foreign funding would be declared foreign agents, potentially exposing journalists, their sources, or even those who share material on social networks to foreign agent status (The Guardian, 2019).

Similarly, in Belarus the government exercises unrestricted control over mainstream media. The 2008 media law secures a state monopoly over information about political, social, and economic affairs. Libel is both a civil and criminal offense, and the criminal code contains provisions protecting the “honor and dignity” of high-ranking officials (Freedom House: Belarus, 2019). The government owns the only internet service provider and controls the internet through legal and technical means. Not surprisingly, most independent journalists operate under the assumption that they are under surveillance by the Committee for State Security (KGB) (Ibid).

In December 2018, amendments to the media law took effect, requiring that all online media outlets keep records of and disclose to the authorities the names of people who submit comments

(HRW: Belarus, 2019). The amendments also provide for holding owners of registered online media criminally liable for any content on their website.

According to the Belarussian Association of Journalists, in 2019, authorities brought forth about forty cases against around twenty journalists for “illegal production and distribution of mass media products” (HRW: Belarus, 2019).

The situation is not much different in Kazakhstan. Media independence is extremely limited, with the authorities engaging in periodic blocking of online news sources and social media platforms. Libel is a criminal offense in Kazakhstan and the criminal code prohibits insulting the president (Freedom House: Kazakhstan, 2019). New legislation that came into force in January, 2018 has further exacerbated the crackdown on the media landscape, characterized by widespread self-censorship (Ibid). The law requires journalists to verify the accuracy of information prior to publication by consulting with the relevant government bodies or officials, obtaining consent for the publication of personal or otherwise confidential information, and acquiring accreditation as foreign journalists if they work for foreign outlets (Ibid).

The application of the law had a dramatic effect on broadcast media. As of August 2019, 88 foreign television channels had their licenses revoked by the Ministry of Information and Communication for failing to comply with new registration requirements within six months of the law’s implementation (Freedom House: Kazakhstan, 2019). As a result, independent and opposition journalists seem bound to face harassment, arbitrary detention, and spurious criminal prosecutions (HRW: Kazakhstan, 2019).

Compared to its Eurasian partners, the Armenian media landscape seems to enjoy more independence and freedom. While there have been no major restrictions on press freedom since the 2018 “Velvet Revolution,” the Freedom House report suggests that it has not been uncommon for journalists to practice self-censorship to avoid harassment by government or business figures (Freedom House: Armenia, 2019).

While there is a consensus among students of Armenian politics, that the media is freer now that it was under the former government and the, the new government’s low tolerance for criticism remains of concern (Mejlumyan, 2019). Even though the new government does not tend to directly orchestrate news coverage, it has not been uncommon for Prime Minister Pashinyan to attack journalists for critical reporting thus creating a climate of intimidation (Mejlumyan, 2019).

Nevertheless, contrary to other EAEU members, the freedom of expression in Armenia has not been severely limited, thus allowing many dissidents to have their voice heard without reprisals.

The situation is no better in terms of freedom of association in EAEU member countries. While a vibrant civil society is largely viewed as a key component of a democratic society and a crucial instrument for political change, the civil society organizations in EAEU member countries have been characterized by their organizational weakness, and marginality in terms of their social base, financial assets and influence over policy making .

Evans (2011) notes that this picture in Russia considerably owes to the cultural legacy of the Soviet system with pervasive distrust of social organizations and even of the whole public sphere (p. 46). Indeed, it has not been uncommon for post-Soviet societies to perceive civic associations as threat to the power and stability of the state together with the conviction that the state bears the responsibility for the wellbeing of the Society. Meanwhile, the Putin regime has further reinforced such perceptions to thwart civic activism and prevent it from evolving into an issue-specific, value-driven and a robust civil society. More specifically, the Putin regime has been exerting tremendous pressure on NGOs and other political organizations, whether by withholding state funding, personal pressure, or the use of legal instruments including arbitrary arrests to tighten its grip on the public space and curb pluralism (Freedom House: Russia, 2020).

The 2012 Foreign Agent Law has been a huge blow to the NGOs free and independent activities in Russia. According to its provisions, organizations engaging in political activity and receiving foreign funding must register as foreign agents, even if the foreign funding they receive does not actually pay for political activities (Freedom House, 2012).

As a result, the NGOs focusing more on Western ideas, such as LGBT rights get labelled as “foreign” agents. These NGOs encounter a very hostile environment, and face fines and potential shutdowns (Dufalla, 2010).

Similarly, the freedom of association is extremely limited in Belarus, where the registration of groups is remains entirely arbitrary, while the foreign funding to NGOs is treated as interference in domestic affairs (Freedom House: Belarus, 2020).

Only a few human rights groups continue to operate, putting their supporters and activists at the risk harassment by the government. While participation in unregistered or liquidated organizations, which had been criminalized in 2005, was decriminalized in 2018, the Criminal

Code introduced the prospect of large fines thus seeking to curb their activism (Freedom House: Belarus, 2019).

The situation is no better in Kazakhstan, where NGOs routinely face severe legal restrictions on their formation and operation. More specifically, NGOs operate under the conditions of mounting harassment by the government and are at risk of incurring fines and other punishments for obscurely stated offences, such as ‘interfering with government activities or engaging in work beyond the scope of their charters’ (Freedom House: Kazakhstan, 2019).

Not surprisingly, it is not uncommon for civil society activists to face criminal prosecution and imprisonment just for being outspoken and critical. Moreover, to nip in the bud civic activism, many activists would get detained before the protests. Namely, prior to demonstrations organized by the government - critical Oyan, Kazakhstan (Wake up, Kazakhstan) movement on November 9, 2019, many activists got arrested inside and outside of their homes (IPHR, 2020).

The situation is way better in Armenia, where despite their organizational weakness and limited actorness, civil society organizations enjoy considerable freedom and face less harassment by the government.

While civil society played a critical role in the “Velvet Revolution,” the absence of an umbrella organization or clearly reform-oriented movement in Armenia, seems to leave the fate of the societal coalition that brought Nikol Pashinyan to power uncertain. Studies show that despite the growing number of civil society organizations (there are more than 4,000 registered civil society organizations, mainly non-governmental organizations (NGO), absolute majority of them are inactive with little to no potential to represent certain interest groups (Gevorgyan, 2017). NGOs are especially weak in terms of their social base, funding and heavily depend on foreign donors. Thus, further development of civil society organizations’ institutional capacities and networks is essential for boosting their actorness and becoming agents of democracy.

What is common in all EAEU member states, is lack of robust political opposition. Even a quick glance of the Duma presents an unfavorable picture of a fragmented opposition, divided by communist, nationalist, and liberal ideologies. Ironically, only a shared distrust by the public appears to unite these groups, with respondents often associating the parliamentary opposition with terms such as “fake opposition”, “rubber stamp opposition” and even “pro-regime” (Terzyan, 2020).

Meanwhile, in the picture is even more bleak in Belarus and Kazakhstan. Since the ascension of President Alexander Lukashenko in 1994, the opposition has been repressed after most parliamentary and presidential elections without any substantial co-optation. As a result, the opposition has been weak and fragmented (Ash, 2015).

Similarly, genuine opposition parties are not represented in the Kazakhstani parliament, with no opportunity to present themselves as an alternative to the ruling party (Freedom House: Kazakhstan, 2019).

Meanwhile, it is common for opposition activists in both Belarus and Kazakhstan to get harassed, threatened and arrested.

As for Armenia, even though it is undeniable that the ruling ‘My Step’ alliance is popular with Armenian voters, the centralization of power remains a significant problem. Armenia finds itself in a situation, where due to its overwhelming majority in the parliament, the Prime Minister’s party can put forward and pass any law with no compromise. Besides that, while positioning itself as ‘people’s government’ the ruling party seems to downgrade the importance of political opposition. Overall, the narrative of “people’s government” has been frequently used to legitimize government’s policies and even shield it from unwanted opposition, by framing every ‘sabotage’ against the government a step against the Armenian people (Factor, 2019).

Remarkably, none of these countries has had a record of free and fair elections. Although elections are regularly held and for the most part are free of massive fraud, incumbents invariably abuse administrative resources, creating an unlevel playing field between government and opposition.

The most recent exception is the 2018 post-Velvet Revolution parliamentary election in Armenia that was largely regarded as free and fair (Freedom House: Armenia, 2019).

### **Civil Liberties in EAEU Countries**

Major human rights issues in EAEU countries range from arbitrary arrests and detentions to widespread discrimination and violence against minority groups.

The state of human rights in Russia has been on severe decline during Putin’s presidency, with the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly consistently restricted, in law and practice (Amnesty International, 2019).

The long list of human rights abuses in Russia includes arbitrary arrest and detention; extrajudicial killings; pervasive torture by law enforcement authorities; life-threatening conditions in prisons; political prisoners; arbitrary interference with privacy; violence against journalists; severe suppression of the right of peaceful assembly; severe restrictions of religious freedom; severe limits on participation in the political process, including restrictions on opposition candidates’ ability to seek public office; systematic government corruption; trafficking in persons; and crimes involving violence or threats of violence against persons with disabilities, LGBTI persons, and members of ethnic minorities (Department of State: Russia, 2019).

The situation is not much different in Belarus and Kazakhstan, with a long record of suppression of pluralism and violence against dissidents. Moreover, Belarus remains the only European country to use the death penalty. The situation is aggravated by widespread discrimination against the Roma people across Belarus (HRW: Belarus, 2019).

As for EAEU’s ‘most liberal’ member Armenia, even though the state of human rights is not abysmal, a series of human right violations remain a significant problem. This includes poor prison conditions, rampant corruption, inhuman and degrading treatment of persons with disabilities in institutions, as well as discrimination and violence against sexual minorities (Department of State: Armenia, 2018).

Table 1: Political freedoms and civil liberties in EAEU member states

	<b>Freedom of Expression</b>	<b>Freedom of Association</b>	<b>Elections</b>	<b>Minority Rights</b>	<b>Prison Conditions</b>
Armenia	Average	Average	Average/Poor	Poor	Poor
Belarus	Poor	Poor	Poor	Poor	Poor
Kazakhstan	Poor	Poor	Poor	Poor	Poor
Russia	Poor	Poor	Poor	Poor	Poor

Source: Author

As a matter of fact, the Russia’s Eurasian partners have largely met the requirements of its ‘conservative alliance’ by largely discriminating against sexual minority groups.

This has much to do with the Kremlin’s emphasis on the necessity of defending traditional values as opposed to those of liberal democracy. The latter has been associated with the acceptance of homosexual rights- hailed by the Russian president as a “genderless and fruitless tolerance” that

allows “good and evil” to be valued as equal (Terzyan, 2020). Moreover, the West has been regarded as a purely LGBT-promoting community that endangers national identities and traditional values in the post-Soviet countries and beyond (MAXCAP Policy Briefs, 2015).

To prevent all these from happening, Putin has positioned Russia as a counter-hegemonic force opposed to the West’s “crackdown” on conservative values and even world’s last bastion of traditional values, characterized by its rejection of revolutions, homosexuality and feminism (Orlova, 2018).

Apart from encouraging homophobia, this rhetoric has led to the further misrepresentation of liberal democracy -often contrasted with Russian “sovereign democracy.” Remarkably, the narratives that underpin Putin’s discourse have proven popular with the Russian population. According to a survey conducted by the state-run Russian Public Opinion Research Centre, nearly two-thirds of Russians believe that homosexuals are conspiring to subvert the country’s traditional values (Terzyan, 2020). Moreover, they believe in the existence of an organization that strives to destroy Russian spiritual values through imposing radical minority norms on the country’s majority (Ibid).

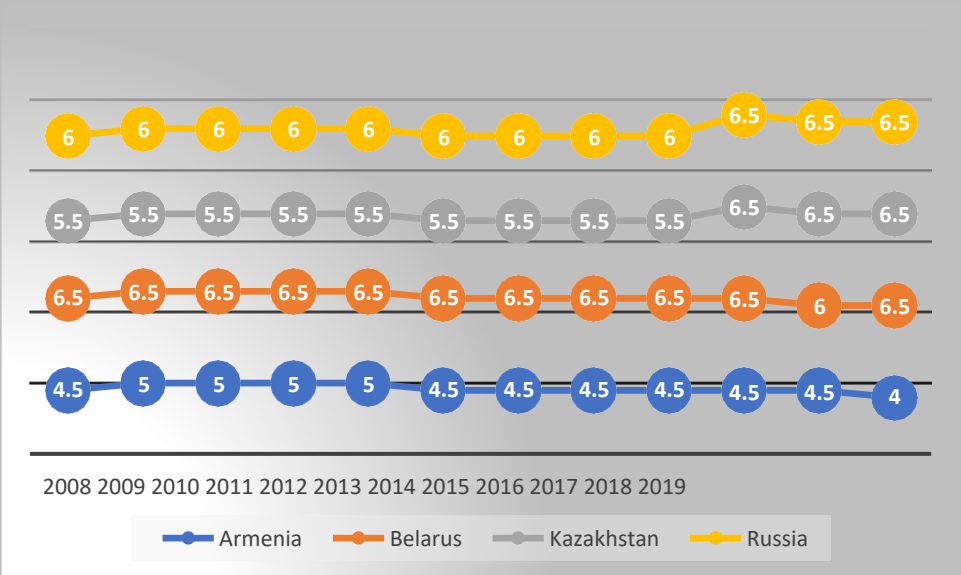
Such perceptions allowed Putin to strengthen his “strongman” image, with the president not allowing the Western liberals to weaken Russia. The necessity of standing up to the West has served as a convenient pretext to suppress dissent and pluralism across the two country by labelling civic and opposition activists as “anti-Russian spies,” or “foreign agents,” “traitors,” who are involved in the “Western conspiracies” (Duacé, 2015). Moreover, the Russian government passed several laws aimed at shrinking the public space by stigmatizing the core of the liberal-reform movement as “foreign agents” fighting against traditional Russian values (Wilkinson, 2014).

Even a quick glance at the international human right watchdogs’ reports show severe violations of LGBT rights in EAEU countries (Freedom House: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, 2020). While there is huge societal discrimination against minority groups in these countries, the government agencies have not done much to alleviate the situation.

The biggest unanswered questions involves explaining if the state of democracy has deteriorated in EAEU countries since they joined the union.

To answer this question I have analyzed their annual Freedom House scores from 2008 to 2019, representing the levels of civil liberties and political rights in each country on a scale from 1 (most free) to 7 (least free).

**Chart 1: Freedom House Scores of Civil liberties and political freedoms in EAEU countries from 2008 to 2019**



Source: Freedom House

Clearly, while the state of political rights has slightly deteriorated in Russia and Kazakhstan and by contrast improved in Armenia since the establishment of the EAEU, there have been no major shifts or considerable changes.

That said, at this point there is no considerable evidence to contend that Eurasian integration has shaped EAEU member states' regime outcomes in any way.



## **Conclusion**

The foundation of the Eurasian Economic Union moves far beyond regional economic integration and represents Russia's attempts at reorganizing the post-Soviet space and shielding the latter from unwanted Western 'intrusions'.

The EAEU member states share much in common in terms of their post-Soviet authoritarian legacy, weakness of democratic institutions and civil society. As a result, centralization of power, weak rule of law, rampant corruption and brutal suppression of dissent and pluralism are unmistakable characteristics of EAEU member states.

EAEU's smallest member Armenia stands out in terms of its less abysmal record of human rights and political freedoms. Moreover, even though the 2018 "Velvet Revolution" has left country's centrality in the Russian-led socio-political order unchanged, many see the domestic change conducive to economic and political reforms.

While there is no denying that the EAEU is inherently authoritarian union, there is no considerable evidence of either negative or positive relationship between Eurasian integration and the state of human rights.

The findings of this study suggest that even the state of democracy has slightly deteriorated in Russia and Kazakhstan and by contrast improved in Armenia since the establishment of the EAEU, there have been no major shifts or considerable changes.

That said, it is hard to contend that Eurasian integration has made the EAEU countries less democratic than they would have been otherwise.

Further studies are essential for explaining whether and how exactly the Eurasian integration influences regime outcomes in EAEU countries.

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