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**Article — Published Version**

## Hidden Transformation of Authoritarian Regionalism: Tracing Organizations' Functions Through Officials' Biographies

Politische Vierteljahresschrift

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Springer Nature

*Suggested Citation:* Libman, Alexander (2024) : Hidden Transformation of Authoritarian Regionalism: Tracing Organizations' Functions Through Officials' Biographies, Politische Vierteljahresschrift, ISSN 1862-2860, Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden GmbH, Wiesbaden, Vol. 66, Iss. 3, pp. 649-674, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-024-00556-9>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/330645>

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# Hidden Transformation of Authoritarian Regionalism: Tracing Organizations' Functions Through Officials' Biographies

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Received: 5 January 2024 / Revised: 12 June 2024 / Accepted: 13 June 2024 / Published online: 17 July 2024  
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**Abstract** Authoritarian regionalism constitutes a challenging topic for empirical research due to a substantial gap between official mandates and the actual practices of regional organizations (ROs). While formally most authoritarian ROs “download” the global script of regionalism and imitate the European Union, in practice, they are used by their member states for different purposes than economic integration—in particular, to legitimize the nondemocratic regimes. At the same time, there are also examples of authoritarian ROs that go beyond simple autocracy-sustaining rhetoric and have actual policy implications. This paper argues that the differences between authoritarian ROs can be better observed if one looks not at the official mandates but at the background of their key officials. Using the case of post-Soviet Eurasia with its proliferation of authoritarian ROs, I show that a look at the biographies of officials clearly reveals the existence of two generations of ROs—one with primarily symbolic importance and one with actual economic integration ambitions.

**Keywords** Performance of regional organizations · Informal governance · Authoritarian regionalism · Eurasia · Personnel politics

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## Verborgene Transformation des autoritären Regionalismus: Biografien der Beamt\*innen als Abbildung der Funktionen der Organisationen

**Zusammenfassung** Der autoritäre Regionalismus bildet aufgrund einer besonders großen Diskrepanz zwischen den Mandaten und den realexistierenden Praktiken der regionalen Organisationen eine Herausforderung für die empirische Forschung. Formal folgen die meisten autoritären regionalen Organisationen dem globalen Skript des Regionalismus, indem sie die EU imitieren. Die realen Ziele der regionalen Organisationen können aber von denen der wirtschaftlichen Integration massiv abweichen. Dies hängt unter anderem damit zusammen, dass sie sich eher auf die Legitimierung der nichtdemokratischen Regime konzentrieren. Es gibt jedoch Beispiele von autoritären regionalen Organisationen, die sich nicht nur auf eine reine rhetorische Unterstützung der autoritären Systeme begrenzen, sondern auch reale Politikimplikationen verfolgen. Dieser Aufsatz zeigt, dass sich die Besonderheiten der autoritären Organisationen besser verstehen lassen, wenn man die Biografien der Beamt\*innen und nicht (nur) die offiziellen Mandate dieser Organisationen in den Fokus nimmt. Das Beispiel des postsowjetischen Eurasiens offenbart mit seiner Vielzahl von autoritären regionalen Organisationen, dass in dieser Region zwei Generationen von regionalen Organisationen vorherrschen – zum einen diejenigen mit rein symbolischen Funktionen und zum anderen solche mit ernst gemeinten Ambitionen in Richtung der wirtschaftlichen Integration ihrer Mitglieder.

**Schlüsselwörter** Leistungen der regionalen Organisationen · Informelle Steuerung · Autoritärer Regionalismus · Eurasien · Personalpolitik

### 1 Introduction

Why do countries create regional organizations (ROs)? A relatively intuitive explanation is that ROs are created because their member states expect them to implement certain *functions* (Mansfield and Solingen 2010).<sup>1</sup> These functions could be explicitly stated in the mandates of the ROs or be of an informal nature (Vinokurov and Libman 2017). From this point of view, it is possible to differentiate between ROs with different levels of performance: Some are better at implementing their functions than others. The reasons for the underperformance of ROs have played an important role in both European Union (EU) studies and comparative regionalism research. In EU studies, the focus is on both the progress of the EU as an organization and the degree of compliance of individual countries with EU legislation (Mastenbroek 2005; Hartlapp and Falkner 2009; Thomann and Sager 2017). Comparative regionalism goes even further and explicitly looks at ROs with no policy impact whatsoever (Montecinos 1996; Jenne et al. 2017; Gray 2014, 2018). Undoubtedly, the performance of an RO can be evaluated only against the backdrop of a particular function; if the function is identified incorrectly (e.g., because of the deviation between the

<sup>1</sup> There are alternative perspectives: For example, ROs could be seen as a product of bureaucratic action (Gray 2018) or as part of regional identity building (Thomas 2017).

official and the unofficial goals), then an RO could appear to be underperforming, while it is actually doing exactly what the member states expect it to do.

From this point of view, authoritarian regionalism (or ROs created by authoritarian countries; see Libman and Obydenkova 2018a) poses a particularly interesting topic for research. First, a large body of literature argues that authoritarian regionalism should exhibit poorer performance than democratic regionalism, particularly at the level of economic and political cooperation. Empirically, this point has been made in both large-*N* studies (Mansfield et al. 2002) and research on individual regions, including the Middle East (Ulrichsen 2018; Sadiki 2020), Africa (Kirschner and Stapel 2016), and Latin America (Schmitter 1970; Márquez-Ramos et al. 2017). Among the main explanations for this phenomenon are the lack of ability of authoritarian regimes to offer credible commitments to other countries (Smith 1998) and their unwillingness to cede sovereignty (Coe 2019).

However, a novel literature suggests that the interpretation of authoritarian ROs as underperforming is based on incorrect identification of the benchmark against which the performance is evaluated (Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Kneuer et al. 2019; Cottiero and Haggard 2023). The argument of these studies is that for authoritarian regimes, the most important function of an RO is to strengthen regime stability, for example by increasing its legitimacy. Therefore, authoritarian ROs are created primarily to show that authoritarian leaders enjoy support abroad among their peers; the ability of ROs to contribute to actual cooperation across countries (stipulated in their mandates) is, from the regime's point of view, irrelevant.<sup>1</sup> Empirical evidence in favor of this argument is also drawn for different parts of the world, including Africa (Söderbaum 2004) and Latin America (Kneuer et al. 2019).

However, how can one be sure that a particular RO created by authoritarian regimes indeed focuses on legitimacy boosting or on, for example, achieving economic goals? The formal mandates of the ROs are not helpful in making this distinction. Authoritarian regimes frame their mandates as if the goals of the ROs were to achieve economic and political cooperation, even if that is not the goal for which ROs were established; in this case, the ROs themselves appear to be more legitimate and thus can better support the legitimacy of the regimes that created them. Similarly, the assumption that autocrats would never be interested in economic cooperation is extremely simplistic and probably incorrect. If cooperation generates economic growth, then it could generate rents that regimes can capture or distribute to loyal groups (Ambrosio 2014) or use to increase the popularity of authoritarian regimes among their subjects (Dimitrov 2009). This also matters for the calculus of autocrats.

To answer this question, one could engage in detailed case studies of individual ROs, and there have been numerous projects of this type. However, some level of ambiguity remains—first, because of the rather untransparent way that authoritarian regimes make their decisions (Barros 2016) and, second, because the performance of the ROs is influenced not only by how they function and the intentions of their members but also by the external environment in which they operate and the shocks they are subject to. From this point of view, using *triangulation* and applying different approaches to studying authoritarian ROs could be particularly important.

This paper suggests a novel perspective, which thus far has received rather limited attention in the literature: to look at the *biographies of key officials of ROs*. In the highly informal and personalized political environment that exists in many authoritarian states, people are more important than formal rules, and this is likely to hold for ROs created by autocracies. This means that authoritarian leaders will “populate” ROs created for a variety of purposes with very different types of bureaucrats and that bureaucrats and politicians with different ambitions and life paths will self-select into different ROs in which authoritarian countries participate. If one observes that these ROs have bureaucrats of certain backgrounds, then this could be yet another piece of evidence that would support shifting the assessment of the goals of the RO in a certain direction.

Rather than testing the proposed approach in a cross-regional setting, I focus on a particular region—the so-called post-Soviet Eurasia.<sup>2</sup> This increases the feasibility of the study: It is hardly possible to systematically review the in-depth qualitative literature on the performance of ROs for multiple parts of the world (especially because the literature is, to a large extent, situated in diverse area studies), and without such a review, comparing conclusions based on biographical data with other sources of data would be difficult. Eurasia was specifically chosen for three reasons. First, the empirical availability of biographical data is greater for post-Soviet Eurasia than for other parts of the world where authoritarian ROs exist. Second, Eurasian ROs are prominently featured in the research on authoritarian regionalism and are among the most frequently cited examples in this literature (Russo and Stoddard 2018; Obydenkova and Libman 2019). Third, Eurasia is characterized by the coexistence of multiple ROs with similar formal functions but arguably very different performance. If the argument of this paper were true, then I would observe variations in the biographies of officials of these ROs as well. Nevertheless, the focus on merely one region is one limitation of this study, though it could be a potentially stimulating topic for further research on other ROs.

The results of the paper clearly confirm the existence of two types of Eurasian ROs in terms of their personnel. The ROs of the 1990s are characterized by older staff with hardly any experience in the private sector and no Western education; more recent ROs of the 2000s have much younger personnel who are frequently Western trained. This fits the widespread perception in the literature of the first-generation ROs as rhetorical ones and the second-generation ROs as more policy oriented, reaffirming the validity of the approach developed in this paper.

The remaining part of the paper is organized as follows. The next section summarizes the main theoretical arguments. The subsequent section reviews the development of regionalism in post-Soviet Eurasia. The following sections present the data used in the paper, describe the methodology of analysis, and summarize the main findings. The last section offers a conclusion and a discussion of possible avenues of future research.

<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge that this term is disputed, as the very use of the term is part of the rhetorical construction of the region (Heller 2022). I apply it primarily because the ROs I study describe themselves as “Eurasian” and see themselves as part of a common family of ROs.

## 2 Personalist Politics and Authoritarian Regionalism

The argument of the paper consists of two elements. First, I claim that authoritarian political regimes, in general, are characterized by greater importance of the personal backgrounds of officials than of formal rules (and that this is especially the case for the type of autocracies prevalent in post-Soviet Eurasia). Second, I claim that the combination of this feature of authoritarian regimes and the homogeneity of the formal structure of goals of ROs across the world make examining officials' backgrounds when studying authoritarian regionalism particularly promising.

### 2.1 Personalist Politics in Authoritarian Regimes

Recent years have generally witnessed growing attention to how the features of politicians and bureaucrats (Berry and Fowler 2021)—their careers, gender, social origin, and education—affect policy choices in different political regimes (Krcmaric et al. 2020), and these characteristics are likely to be particularly important in autocracies (Jones and Olken 2005). There are two reasons for this. First, authoritarian regimes are characterized by a higher *concentration of power* (Sinkkonen 2021). Thus, whereas in a democracy, decisions by an individual are balanced by a large number of other actors, in autocracies, this is not necessarily the case. Therefore, the individual-specific reasons for these decisions (including the individual's background) become more important. Second, authoritarian regimes are more likely to rely on *informal rules and practices* (Libman and Obydenkova 2013), which depend on individuals' personal networks and connections. The absence of common depersonalized rules is fundamentally the key characteristic of the "limited access order" systems to which autocracies belong (North et al. 2009).

Therefore, in autocracies, the same offices could be associated with less or greater political influence depending on the personal power and connections of individuals occupying these positions. This is, for sure, not a unique feature of authoritarianism (Baturu and Elkind 2017)<sup>3</sup>; however, in autocracies, the discrepancy between official and real power is likely to be particularly large. There are high-profile examples of authoritarian regimes in which power was completely separated from official positions; Deng Xiaoping in China and, until 1941, Joseph Stalin in the USSR are probably the best-known cases of such mismatch. For the purposes of this study, it is worth noting another highly relevant issue: The competence of a particular officeholder in an authoritarian state is more important than that in a democracy.<sup>4</sup> It will not be compensated by a formal decision-making procedure with external scrutiny (possibly also from the general public and the press) or by the multiplicity of actors (with different competence levels) involved in making the decision. Thus, (in)competence can have major repercussions for the functioning of authoritarian regimes (e.g., Kotkin 2009).

<sup>3</sup> In democratic political systems, a good example is the variation of power of the Office of the Vice President in the United States, particularly under Dick Cheney (Goldstein 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Although, of course, there are examples of disastrous consequences of incompetence in democracies as well; see Caselli and Morelli (2004).

If, for some reason, authoritarian leaders are not interested in changing the formal rules, i.e., responsibilities associated with certain offices, they can still manipulate the functions and power of these offices by selecting specific individuals to occupy them.<sup>5</sup> The reasons why authoritarian regimes prefer not to change formal rules vary. One reason, as I will show in what follows, is legitimacy concerns. For example, electoral authoritarian regimes draw their legitimacy from imitating democratic political systems (von Soest and Grauvogel 2017). This means that they avoid *formally* stripping the power of certain political offices (such as parliaments or courts) since, otherwise, the imitation becomes implausible. However, by selecting a weak chairperson of a parliament or head of a constitutional court, autocrats effectively preclude them from exercising the formal power associated with their positions (von Gall 2024).

At the same time, bureaucrats and politicians are also likely to attempt to self-select into offices depending on their expectations of the preferences of the regime rather than (only) the official status of the position. One could expect bureaucrats to pursue different goals: Some of them may be more interested in obtaining positions with greater potential for career advancement and policy influence, while others may focus on effort reduction (Burkhardt and Libman 2018). For the former, positions where authoritarian regimes expect actual political decisions to be made are more attractive than political sinecures; for the latter, uninfluential but well-paid and formally important offices could be the preferred choice. It is plausible that candidates have better information about the actual intentions of political leaders than external observers (such as scholars) and thus can better identify the importance of individual offices and organizations for the regime than those who study authoritarian regimes.

While the personalization of politics is a universal feature of authoritarian regimes, the degree to which it is present varies across different autocracies. Some regimes are characterized by stronger power sharing and collective decision-making than others (Boix and Svolik 2013). The arguments presented in this section are therefore particularly relevant for more personalist autocracies (Kendall-Taylor et al. 2017). In the last two decades, Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, which are the three main actors of Eurasian regionalism, have been characterized by growing personalization and informalization of their politics (Furman 2004; Frear 2018; Baturu and Elkink 2021; Isaacs 2010; Fortescue 2020; Hartwell 2023; Golosov 2023).<sup>6</sup> In fact, for Russia there is a large amount of literature documenting the importance of personal characteristics for the power and performance of officials. At the subnational level, the characteristics of bureaucrats, such as their connections to the federal center and their work experience in the region (Schulz and Libman 2015), social origin (Demin et al. 2019), and *nomenklatura* background (Shurchkov

<sup>5</sup> There are several studies showing how authoritarian leaders adjust the level of competence of appointees to specific positions depending on the particular goals they want to achieve and the challenges they face (Schleiter 2013; Bai and Zhou 2019; Kristiansen 2023). Unfortunately, there is hardly any research looking at the *heterogeneity* of appointments across *different* offices of an authoritarian regime.

<sup>6</sup> In Kazakhstan, the resignation of Nazarbayev in 2019 resulted in a more complex system with two power centers (the president and the chairman of the security council), equally characterized by the gap between the formal and the real power (Caron 2021); however, violent protests in 2022 led to the reestablishment of the full dominance of the president (Kudaibergenova and Laruelle 2022).

2012), as well as the cohesion of regional elites (Garifullina et al. 2020; Melnikov 2023) and ties between regional political actors (Schultz et al. 2014; Yakovlev and Aisin 2019), play important roles in regional political and economic development. Thus, the post-Soviet Eurasian ROs can be regarded as the “most probable” cases (Eckstein 1992) for examining my argument.

## 2.2 Authoritarian Regionalism

Why do authoritarian leaders manipulate the characteristics of the officials they appoint to authoritarian ROs rather than the formal mandates of these ROs? To explain this, one needs to look at two arguments. First, authoritarian regionalism should be capable of exercising different functions, which could be more or less relevant for individual autocrats. Second, authoritarian leaders should be somewhat interested in refraining from changing the formal mandates of ROs even if they want to change their function.<sup>7</sup>

The first argument immediately follows from the literature quoted in the introduction of this paper. On the one hand, the literature on authoritarian regionalism highlights the importance of authoritarian ROs as tools of legitimacy provision (Debre 2021) and fora for mutual learning (Hall 2023). It even points out that from the point of view of these goals, purely rhetorical regionalism could be particularly attractive for authoritarian regimes: While strengthening their rule, it ensures that they do not become excessively dependent on other autocracies (Libman and Davidzon 2023). On the other hand, authoritarian regimes could also be interested in creating ROs that promote economic cooperation across their countries or strengthen security cooperation (Collins 2009; Libman and Vinokurov 2018). This means that autocracies could create ROs with different objectives. For simplicity, I will refer to them as rhetorical and policy-oriented ROs, respectively.<sup>8</sup>

The second argument is more challenging. Theoretically, nothing precludes autocracies from openly stating their goals when designing ROs (in the past, organizations such as the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance [COMECON] directly presented themselves as opponents to the capitalist West). In the modern world, however, there is a constraint on the choice of formal mandates and rules of ROs: the so-called global script of ROs, which determines the conditions under which they are perceived as legitimate. Throughout the world today, ROs are strikingly similar to each other and follow a common pattern that is heavily influenced by the example of the EU (Lenz 2013). To supply legitimacy to the leaders of the member states, an RO should follow this script as well, i.e., imitate the EU to some extent (otherwise, the organization will not be perceived as serious and respectable). Börzel and van Hüllen (2015) provide a detailed analysis of how authoritarian and democratic countries alike follow the global script in designing their ROs. However, EU-like

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<sup>7</sup> Or, equivalently, create a new RO with different functions.

<sup>8</sup> Importantly, I do not assume a sharp separation between these types; many organizations are likely to oscillate between them over time. On top of that, even if authoritarian regimes aim to go beyond pure rhetoric, they fail to achieve this result: Mutual mistrust, poor quality of bureaucracy, and insufficient resources could lead to actual failure (and not preprogrammed failure due to imitation) of ROs.



ROs contain several elements that are problematic for authoritarian states, such as the delegation of authorities to a supranational body or the creation of a common legal framework that actually constrains autocrats. To solve this tension, autocrats are likely to create ROs with major differences between their formal mandates and actual goals. On paper, these ROs imitate the EU (and thus are perceived as legitimate in the international community),<sup>9</sup> but in practice, they refrain from any economic and political cooperation and merely engage in rhetoric supporting the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes.

Because of the global script, rhetorical and policy-oriented authoritarian ROs may be indistinguishable from each other in terms of official mandates. However, the differences in the goals of ROs are likely to be reflected in the selection of bureaucrats to be appointed to positions in the ROs. Specifically, I expect that *autocrats will, on average, appoint more-competent officials to policy-oriented ROs and less-competent officials to rhetorical ROs*. In the case of policy-oriented ROs, competence is more important: The functions of rhetorical ROs (legitimacy provision through the illusion of support of a regime by its peers and fora for mutual learning) require much less activity on the side of bureaucrats than when ROs actually have to implement economic or security policies. In addition, competence could also help the officials of a policy-oriented RO act as policy entrepreneurs if they face bureaucratic resistance in the national administration: Officials who are more competent are more likely to devise novel approaches to solving bureaucratic problems. For rhetorical ROs, overcoming resistance from national administrations is not a relevant issue because they have no policy functions. Conversely, policy-oriented ROs are more likely to attract more-competent bureaucrats. In rhetorical ROs, competence is unlikely to pay off in terms of supporting future careers (because there are no decisions to be made, which would require a certain level of competence).

Two caveats should be mentioned. First, generally speaking, it is also possible that authoritarian regimes appoint officials who are *less* competent to the positions of actual power. Egorov and Sonin (2011) and Zakharov (2016) argue that more-competent officials could be perceived by the regime as a threat (since they are more likely to gain support from the elites and bureaucracy or have larger outside options). There is, however, an important difference between positions in ROs and other positions in the bureaucratic hierarchy. Unlike, say, ministries of finance or defense, which are necessary in any regime, whether an autocracy would support the establishment of a policy-oriented RO is a matter of choice. If autocrats are concerned about the risks of excessive dependence on the RO, then they are more likely to keep it rhetorical from the start than to try to transform it into a policy-oriented one and at the same time appoint incompetent bureaucrats (Libman and Vinokurov 2018). One can imagine more complex appointment strategies: Competent bureaucrats could be sent to policy-oriented ROs because this, on the one hand, puts them at a distance from the national centers of power (and thus reduces their

<sup>9</sup> One can even imagine rhetorical organizations making more ambitious promises and plans (which the member states plan to ignore anyway) while the policy-oriented organizations declare less ambitious goals.

potential influence in domestic politics) but, on the other hand, does not appear to be a demotion (due to the arguably high importance of the RO).<sup>10</sup>

Second, member countries of an RO could have different perspectives on the goals of the organization. Some states may be interested in transforming ROs to be more policy oriented, while others will be content with their rhetorical functions. Some states may be concerned that ROs will become instruments in the hands of other states. In this case, one of the key principles in the appointments will be preventing this scenario (e.g., the state will send bureaucrats to the RO, whose main task will be to block the attempts of other states to transform the RO in an undesirable direction). The perceptions of the functions of ROs can also change over time; rhetorical ROs could become more policy oriented and vice versa, depending upon the performance of the ROs and the conditions under which they operate.

My argument implies that to understand the functions of authoritarian ROs, one needs to look at the biographies of their key officials, which reflect their experience and competence. Unfortunately, there has hardly been any research done from this perspective—not only for authoritarian ROs but also, generally speaking, within the domain of comparative regionalism. Although EU studies regularly look at the biographies of EU officials (e.g., Hooghe 2005; Wille 2013), in comparative regionalism this approach is relatively rare (see also Parthenay 2019). Some work originated from the IO BIO project,<sup>11</sup> collecting data on the Secretaries-General of the ROs; thus, Reinalda (2014) looks at the Secretaries-General of international organizations and ROs from Africa, pointing out the substantial deficit of biographical information for this group of ROs. The information deficit is indeed a crucial reason explaining the lack of research on this topic for most ROs. As I will show in what follows, post-Soviet Eurasia is a welcome exception to this problem.

### 3 Regionalism in Post-Soviet Eurasia

The first major Eurasian RO—the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)<sup>12</sup>—was created by the same set of agreements that declared the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. It is unclear whether its original goal was associated with promoting any form of economic or political cooperation; rather, the objective could have been to assist in the peaceful resolution of possible disputes associated with the collapse of the USSR and the implementation of economic and political reforms (Adams 1998). Similarly, it is unclear whether the CIS of the early 1990s can be seen as an example of an authoritarian RO, as many of its members were characterized by relatively pluralist political systems (although this pluralism could have been an

<sup>10</sup> However, it is likely that these strategies are used in individual cases rather than systematically, and the statistical analysis of this paper focuses on identifying the *average* bureaucratic profile.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ru.nl/politicologie/io-bio/io-biobiographical-dictionary-sgs-ios/>

<sup>12</sup> Members of the CIS are Belarus, Russia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Georgia left the organization in 2009. The membership status of Ukraine is unclear. Turkmenistan unilaterally declared itself an observer in the CIS.

outcome of low state capacity rather than of a democratic development trajectory; Frye 2012).

The CIS was created as a multitasking organization that covered economic, political, and social issues. In 1993–1994, however, the focus of the organization changed as most of its members signed a series of additional treaties that envisioned the establishment of a free trade area, payment union, and economic union of the CIS. This indicated, first, a shift of attention toward the economic mandate and, second, the use of language borrowed from the global script of European regionalism. Since then, economic issues seem to have remained a priority for most Eurasian ROs, many of which pursue similar objectives that are essentially in line with the Balassa (1974) stages of integration: the removal of trade barriers, the establishment of a common external trade tariff, the liberalization of the movement of capital and labor, and the coordination of economic policy. Within the framework of the CIS, these goals were never achieved (Kubicek 2009). In economic terms, the CIS managed to merely create a limited free trade area by 2011.

Therefore, since 1994, a smaller subgroup of CIS members centered on Russia has established a series of ROs with very similar mandates focusing exclusively on economic integration: the first Customs Union (1995),<sup>13</sup> the Eurasian Economic Community (2000),<sup>14</sup> and the Single Economic Space (2003).<sup>15</sup> None of these ROs managed to achieve their objectives (Libman and Vinokurov 2012). In addition, since 1996, two Eurasian states—Russia and Belarus—have declared the goal of even deeper integration. In 1999, they established the Union State of Russia and Belarus (USRB), which had the objective of full-fledged economic, political, and security integration up to the level of merger of two countries into a single state. While the USRB ensured the free movement of people within the organization, the encompassing political and economic union was never created (Deyermond 2004). In addition to economic ROs, in 2002 the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was established as a defense and military alliance.<sup>16</sup> Davidzon (2021) showed that the CSTO also failed to achieve any substantial level of security cooperation and remained a purely rhetorical RO.

The literature cites multiple reasons for the poor performance of these ROs (Aslund et al. 1999; Kubicek 2009; Libman and Vinokurov 2012). One of the key arguments is that pursuing a program that encompasses economic integration contradicted the ongoing nation-building processes in many Eurasian states and their willingness to integrate with the global economy (Abdelal 2005; Darden 2009). In addition, the high asymmetry between Russia and other Eurasian countries has caused concerns of excessive dependence on Russia among smaller Eurasian states (Libman 2011). Finally, the deep economic crisis that Eurasian countries experienced was not conducive to economic integration (Vinokurov and Libman 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Members were Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>14</sup> Members were Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (and, for a short period of time, Uzbekistan).

<sup>15</sup> Members were Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine.

<sup>16</sup> Members were Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Armenia (and, for a short period, Uzbekistan).

By the early 2000s, most Eurasian countries, including Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, had become more or less consolidated authoritarian regimes (Nisnevich and Ryabov 2020). Thus, from that point on, Eurasian ROs can be analyzed from the perspective of authoritarian regionalism studies. In fact, Eurasian regionalism served as a key empirical case for many studies highlighting the usefulness of rhetorical regionalism for authoritarian states (Obydenkova and Libman 2019). On the one hand, throughout the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, the idea of post-Soviet regionalism enjoyed widespread popular support in these countries, which was used by the regimes (in particular, in Belarus and Kazakhstan, where the opposition was framed as jeopardizing the integration process; Karbalevich 2001; Anceschi 2020). On the other hand, Eurasian ROs openly supported regime preservation practices of their member states. The CIS, for example, has its own mission of electoral observers who systematically endorse even the most rigged and problematic elections in the member states (Fawn 2006).

In 2007–2010, a new generation of ROs in Eurasia was established: the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB), the Eurasian Fund for the Stabilization and Development (EFSD), and the second Customs Union (CU), which was transformed into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015.<sup>17</sup> These organizations continue to focus on economic regionalism. The second CU is a particularly good example of an RO, which essentially pursued the same goals as the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) and the first CU (the two of which had very similar memberships). However, for the second CU, the EDB, and the EFSD, the implementation gap was much smaller than that for the predecessor ROs, and the progress of economic integration was much greater (Libman and Vinokurov 2024).

For instance, the EDB operates as a regional development bank, financing numerous projects and (until the war in Ukraine in 2022) intensively cooperating with other regional financial organizations (Vinokurov 2021). This clearly contrasts with the Inter-State Bank, an organization of the CIS, which turned into a zombie RO (Vinokurov and Libman 2017). The EFSD, which emerged originally as an ad hoc reaction to the global financial crisis, plays an important role in stabilizing the finances of its member states (Fritz and Mühlich 2024). The EAEU is a functioning customs union (with several exceptions) and a space for the free movement of capital and labor (Vinokurov 2018). It is also a highly prominent example of how the global script of regionalism affects the design of Eurasian ROs. The key bodies of the EAEU—the Eurasian Economic Commission (EAEC) and the Court of the EAEU—are modeled after the examples of the EU Commission and the European Court of Justice, and their officials explicitly refer to the EU as the benchmark (Libman 2019). The design of the EAEU includes some level of supranationality: The decisions of the board of the EAEC on trade and tariffs immediately become part of the national law, and the board members are responsible for individual sectors (e.g., trade, antitrust, agriculture) rather than merely serving as representatives of the member states (Vinokurov 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Members of the EDB and EFSD are Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Tajikistan; the EAEU includes the same countries except for Tajikistan.

The reasons for the differences between the early Eurasian ROs and the EDB, EFSD, and EAEU are subject to scholarly debates. Studies indicate, for example, the declining dependence of key Eurasian countries on Russia, which made them more willing to enter regional agreements without fear of excessive Russian influence (Libman and Vinokurov 2018); larger financial and economic resources of the member states (Vinokurov and Libman 2014); and, in contrast to the previously mentioned argument, Russia's willingness to bind the foreign economic policy options of Eurasian states and to mark its sphere of influence (Kirkham 2016). Furman and Libman (2019) argue that while for the first generation of authoritarian ROs in Eurasia their members were content with pure imitation (increasing the legitimacy of the regimes), for the second generation, the goals were more ambitious. Russia, in particular, perceived the creation of its own RO as a necessary attribute of great power and thus aspired for the EAEU to be recognized by other key global players (especially the EU), which would hardly be possible for a purely imitational RO. The nonimitational nature of the CU and the EAEU contributed to the emergence of deep geopolitical divisions in Eurasia (Libman and Obydenkova 2018b). Nevertheless, there are doubts about whether the progress of economic cooperation was indeed the main goal of the EAEU and whether the organization was set up as yet another tool to boost the incumbent regime (Libman 2022).

Different members of the EAEU, EDB, and EFSD pursue different objectives in these ROs. First, individual countries still maintain different levels of concern about dependence on Russia, which manifest as varying degrees of willingness to promote policy-oriented rather than rhetorical regionalism (Roberts and Moshes 2016). Kazakhstan, for example, under Nursultan Nazarbayev emphasized its interest in economic cooperation but unequivocally rejected any forms of political integration and cooperation. Belarus showed less interest in policy-oriented regionalism and was concerned about the economic expansion of Russian businesses. Second, individual countries demonstrated different levels of resistance to pressure from Russia. It was already visible at the start of the CU: Unlike Kazakhstan, Belarus tried to delay the implementation of the agreement but ultimately capitulated due to the threat of Russian sanctions (Libman and Vinokurov 2018). In the case of Armenia, the very decision to join the EAEU rather than develop an association agreement with the EU in 2013 was most likely driven by dependence on what was then perceived as the Russian security guarantee (Ter-Matevosyan et al. 2017).

The perception of risks and level of autonomy has also changed because of increasingly imperialist Russian foreign policy. From this point of view, the full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022 certainly constituted a tectonic change for the development of the Eurasian ROs. My analysis, however, explicitly looks at the period preceding the start of the full-scale war. Still, events such as the annexation of Crimea affected the calculus of the Eurasian states as well (Roberts 2017).

In summary, in the economic sphere, there seems to be a sort of “*hidden transformation*” of Eurasian regionalism. The ROs in Eurasia starting from the CIS Economic Union had similar mandates but had different performance, and most likely also had different goals. These differences could have been driven by internal changes in the Eurasian member countries (i.e., consolidation of authoritarian regimes made the regime-boosting function of regionalism more important) and

changes in their foreign policy attitudes and resources. The transformation between the EurAsEC on the one hand and the CU/EAEU on the other is particularly striking because it happened under the same political leaders (Putin, Lukashenka, and Nazarbayev) in the three core countries. This complexity of the transformation process made it very difficult to evaluate Eurasian ROs. The first observers of the CU were extremely skeptical about the future of this organization, expecting it to follow the destiny of its predecessor organizations (Libman 2011). While most observers agree that the EAEU is more a policy-oriented RO than its predecessors, the extent to which it also suffers from an implementation gap is a topic of intensive debate (Hartwell 2013; Dragneva and Wolczuk 2013, 2015; Vinokurov 2018; Dragneva and Hartwell 2022; Pomerlyan and Belitski 2024; Schröder 2024; Libman and Vinokurov 2024).

I argue that the “hidden transformation” should have implications for the bureaucratic appointments of the ROs. One should observe more-competent officials in policy-oriented ROs than in rhetorical ROs. This may be the case even for officials sent by other countries, who would themselves not necessarily be interested in a policy-oriented RO if, due to pressure from other, more powerful states, the RO would become a policy-oriented one. In this case, more-competent officials could better wear off the risks associated with unfavorable decisions made within the RO framework. The next section will put these arguments to the test.

## 4 Dataset

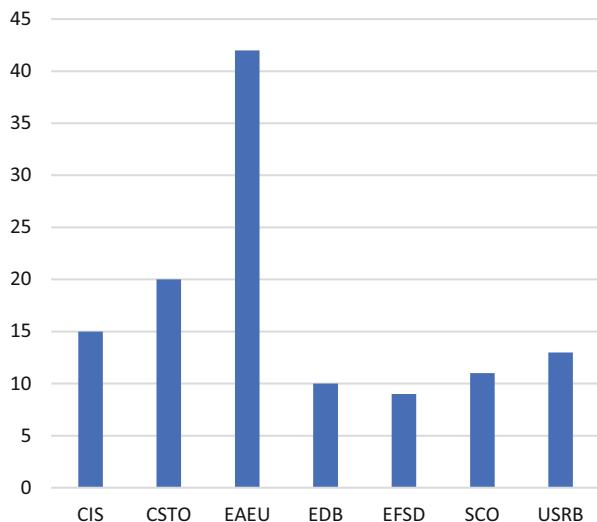
To study the functioning of ROs in Eurasia, this paper draws from a unique dataset collected within the German Research Foundation (DFG)–funded project “The Eurasian Regionalism—An Analysis of Actorness and Integration Potential in the Fields of Economy and Security” implemented in 2021–2024 at the Freie Universität Berlin and the Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen. The data were assembled in 2021, which is the year preceding the start of the full-scale war of Russia against Ukraine. While identifying ROs, I generally follow the approach of Hooghe et al. (2019, p. 24), who define an international organization as “a formal organization for collective decision-making constituted by three or more states.” I depart from this definition only in one instance, by including in my analysis the USBR, which has two members, because this organization is typically included in studies of Eurasian regionalism and is often compared to other ROs (Gawrich and Libman 2021). Thus, my dataset includes seven ROs: the CIS, USBR, EAEU, EDB, EFSD, CSTO, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Unlike other ROs in my dataset, the SCO is not a purely post-Soviet organization; it has two key members (Russia and China) along with Central Asian countries, as well as India and Pakistan (since 2017) and Iran (since 2022). The SCO combines the security component (focusing on combating what the organization declares to be terrorism and extremism) with several elements of economic cooperation; it also plays an important role in the stabilization and preservation of authoritarian regimes (Ambrosio 2008). The inclusion of the SCO allows me to identify how the membership of countries outside the post-Soviet region affects the composition of the key officials.

**Table 1** Officials included in the analysis

RO	Governing bodies	Officials
CIS	Executive Committee Economic Court Economic Commission	Chairperson and deputy chairpersons of the Executive Committee; chairperson and secretary of the Economic Court; members of the Economic Commission
CSTO	Secretariat Joint Staff Permanent Council	Secretary-General and deputies; heads of key departments of the secretariat; head and deputy heads of the Joint Staff; members of the Permanent Council
EAEU	Board of the EAEC Court of the EAEU	Members of the Board (ministers); heads of departments of the Board (second level of hierarchy, roughly equivalent to Directorates-General in the European Union); judges of the Court
EDB	Management Board	Chairperson and deputy chairpersons (members of the Board)
EFSD	Expert Council Project Unit	Members of the Expert Council; head and deputy head of the Project Unit
SCO	Secretariat; Executive Committee of the Regional Antiterrorist Structure	Secretary-General and deputies; director of the Executive Committee and deputies
USRB	Standing Committee Secretariat of the Chairperson of the Supreme State Council	Members of the Standing Committee; head and deputy heads of the Secretariat; heads of key departments of the Standing Committee

*RO* regional organization, *CIS* Commonwealth of Independent States, *CSTO* Collective Security Treaty Organization, *EAEU* Eurasian Economic Union, *EDB* Eurasian Development Bank, *EFSD* Eurasian Fund for the Stabilization and Development, *SCO* Shanghai Cooperation Organization, *USRB* Union State of Russia and Belarus

**Fig. 1** Distribution of officials across the regional organizations covered in the database. *CIS* Commonwealth of Independent States, *CSTO* Collective Security Treaty Organization, *EAEU* Eurasian Economic Union, *EDB* Eurasian Development Bank, *EFSD* Eurasian Fund for the Stabilization and Development, *SCO* Shanghai Cooperation Organization, *USRB* Union State of Russia and Belarus



The dataset includes information on all high-level bureaucrats of Eurasian ROs who are full-time employees of these organizations (excluding governmental officials, e.g., presidents, prime ministers, and deputy prime ministers, who are ex officio members of the governing bodies of these ROs). I look at secretariats, which, however, have different names and organizational structures under different ROs,



**Table 2** Key variables

Dummy	Requirement
Career military	Army service (beyond mandatory draft) or equivalent (e.g., security services)
China experience	At least 1 year of work experience or a university degree in China
Media experience	At least 1 year of work experience in a newspaper or other media outlet
National administration experience	At least 1 year of work experience in the civilian national administration of the member countries
Political experience	Held political office (member of the parliament, minister, etc.) in the past
Private sector experience	At least 1 year of work experience in the private sector
Research experience	At least 1 year of work experience at a university or in a research institution
Russia experience	At least 1 year of work experience or a university degree in Russia (after the collapse of the USSR)
Soviet experience	Work experience or university degree obtained in the USSR before its collapse
Western experience	At least 1 year of work experience or university degree in Australia, New Zealand, United States, Canada, or a European Union country

as well as (in some cases) the judges of the courts of the ROs. Table 1 reports the list of officials included in my analysis. Figure 1 sums the distribution of officials across the ROs covered. Overall, I looked at 120 officials (although some variables are unavailable in certain cases). The largest organization in terms of the number of officials covered is the EAEU, and the smallest one is the EFSD.

Most variables used in this paper are dichotomous variables that reflect the key characteristics of an official's background (Table 2). They cover the experience of work in various sectors (e.g., political position, the private sector, the military, civilian national administration, and research institutions). I also look at whether officials have worked for a substantial period of time in Russia (the largest country in the region), Western countries, or China (the latter country is interesting given the debate about Sino-Russian cooperation as one of the most prominent examples of collaboration among authoritarian regimes and mutual learning). All officials hold a university degree. While some hold a PhD, I refrain from analyzing it due to widespread practices of plagiarism and ghostwriting in post-Soviet countries, and a doctoral degree is often perceived as an attribute of a successful political career rather than an actual scholarly achievement (Abalkina and Libman 2020). I also use information on the age of the officials and on their gender, as it could be inferred from the names and surnames of the officials.

## 5 Empirical Analysis and Results

My analysis proceeded in two steps. First, I performed pairwise comparisons of ROs with each other in terms of the individual characteristics of the officials. I used the CIS (the oldest Eurasian RO) as the benchmark to which to compare other ROs using tests of the equality of means. This analysis allowed me to identify



**Table 3** Key characteristics of the Eurasian regional organizations, pairwise comparison

	CIS average	Difference between the CIS and ...					
		EAEU	EDB	EFSD	SCO	CSTO	USRB
Year of birth	1958.5	<i>10.18***</i>	<i>11.07**</i>	<i>21.50***</i>	5.59	<i>6.91**</i>	4.38
Gender	0.73	0.08	<i>0.27*</i>	<i>0.27*</i>	<i>0.27*</i>	<i>0.27**</i>	-0.04
Private business	0.36	0.23	<i>0.54***</i>	-0.16	-0.27	-0.23	-0.03
Western experience	0.00	0.17	<i>0.30*</i>	<i>0.75***</i>	0.10	0.06	0.00
Research experience	0.00	0.21	0.20	<i>0.33*</i>	<i>0.27*</i>	0.14	0.13
Career military	0.10	-0.05	0.00	-0.10	<i>0.355*</i>	<i>0.57***</i>	0.28
Soviet Union experience	0.80	<i>-0.40**</i>	<i>-0.50**</i>	<i>-0.80***</i>	0.10	-0.02	-0.05
China experience	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.10	0.00	0.00
Russia experience	0.40	-0.07	0.20	0.35	-0.10	0.27	-0.15
National administration experience	1.00	-0.14	<i>-0.20*</i>	-0.13	<i>-0.36***</i>	<i>-0.44***</i>	-0.09
Political experience	0.36	-0.08	-0.04	-0.36	-0.27	<i>-0.29*</i>	0.01
Media experience	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.13

Significant results are in italics

CIS Commonwealth of Independent States, EAEU Eurasian Economic Union, EDB Eurasian Development Bank, EFSD Eurasian Fund for the Stabilization and Development, SCO Shanghai Cooperation Organization, CSTO Collective Security Treaty Organization, USRB Union State of Russia and Belarus

\*Significant at the 10% level; \*\*significant at the 5% level; \*\*\*significant at the 1% level

particular dimensions in which Eurasian ROs could differ from each other. Second, I also attempted to obtain an aggregate measure of the (dis)similarity of Eurasian ROs by examining all characteristics of their officials. For this purpose, I used hierarchical cluster analysis (HCA), which allows for grouping of objects according to their similarity using multiple characteristics. Specifically, I performed HCA for all observations of the dataset (officials), looking at whether officials who work for particular ROs are also more likely to be similar to each other in terms of a variety of their characteristics. Next, I computed the average characteristics for each of the variables I used for each RO and used HCA to understand which ROs were close to each other in terms of these characteristics. This analysis allowed me to identify the subtypes of Eurasian ROs in terms of the typical biography of their officials and to check how these subtypes fit in the discussion presented in the previous section.<sup>18</sup>

Table 3 summarizes the main results of the first step of the analysis. The first column reports the average characteristics of the CIS officials. As of 2021, they were, on average, 63 years old and more often male than female (three-quarters of officials were male). None of the CIS officials had any experience working in Western countries or in China or had ever worked in a research institution or in a media outlet. Thirty-six percent of the officials had previously held a high-level political office. Eighty percent of the officials began their careers in the USSR (which is not surprising given their age). All officials had previously spent part of their career in the national administration of their countries, with 64% having never worked in the private sector. For comparison, the average age of members of the

<sup>18</sup> For the HCA, Ward's linkage approach and Euclidean distance metric were applied.

Russian cabinet in 2022 was 54 years; in Kazakhstan, it was 59 years; and in Belarus, it was 52 years.<sup>19</sup> Thus, CIS officials are older than their national counterparts and typically achieve office in the CIS after a long “traditional” career as a bureaucrat (or, occasionally, politician). In the early 2000s, the CIS and the USRB positions were already seen as “convenient retirement” positions for officials who for some reason could not continue their careers in their countries or simply became too old (Libman 2007). This pattern seemed to persist in 2021.

The USRB, which is another Eurasian RO of the same generation as the CIS and has a similar performance track record, does not differ from the CIS. For the EAEU, the EDB, and the EFSD, however, this is not the case. Their officials are, first, substantially younger: ten years for the EAEU and the EDB and even 20 years for the EFSD. This difference cannot be explained by the fact that the EAEU, EDB, and EFSD were established at a later point in time: The average CIS official joined the organization in 2018, and the same holds for the EAEU (EDB officials joined the organization on average in 2017 and EFSD officials in 2020). There is no significant difference in terms of this characteristic for the ROs in the dataset. Unsurprisingly, the share of officials with Soviet experience in the EDB, EFSD, and EAEU is significantly lower than that in the CIS (in the EFSD, there are no officials who studied or started their career in the USSR). The EDB and the EFSD have a greater share of male officials. Almost three-fourths of the EDB officials have experience working in the private sector. Seventy-five percent of the officials of the EFSD and 30% of the officials of the EDB have worked or studied in Western countries—significantly more than in the CIS. Finally, the EDB is characterized by a smaller share of officials who ever worked in public administration.

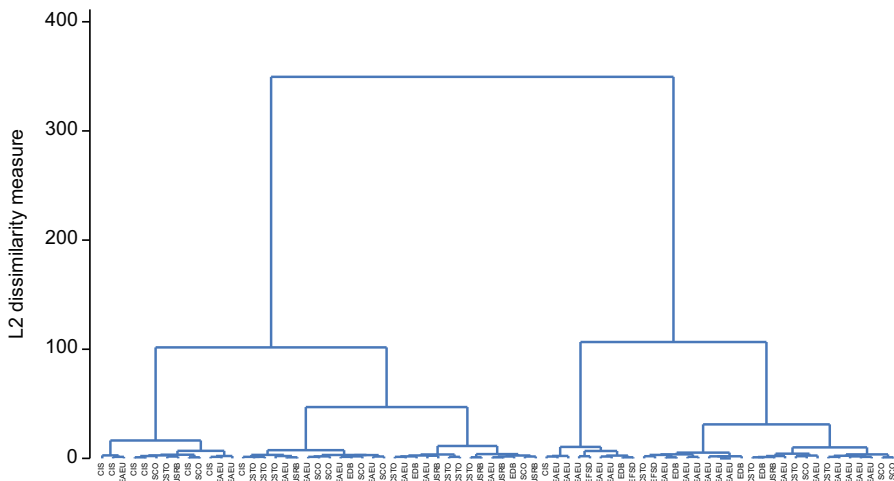
Thus, on average, the EAEU, EDB, and EFSD appear to be organizations with younger officials, who, due to their experience of work in the West, have a better understanding of the modern economic organizations (and of the EU in particular) and, due to their experience of work in the private sector, understand the logic of the business better than governmental officials who lack experience do. This type of official seems to fit more closely with a policy-oriented RO, which also has to import Western governance practices, particularly the EU model—the goal that EAEU officials have openly subscribed to (Libman 2019), as well as to interact with global international organizations in the economic sphere. For a rhetorical RO, this type of personnel composition could potentially be less suitable. A greater share of male officials, ultimately, could indicate that positions in the EAEU, EDB, and EFSD are perceived as being associated with greater power and influence, as in conservative post-Socialist societies, positions with actual power and influence are frequently reserved for men (Ryabova and Ryabov 2011).

My conclusions become substantially vaguer in regard to the security-focused CSTO and SCO. Table 2 shows one common feature of these two ROs that differentiates them from other ROs in the sample: a significantly greater share of the career military (who are, as one would expect, mostly male). While the share of career military in the EDB, EAEU, and EFSD does not exceed 5%, 67% of officials in the CSTO had a career in the military. Unlike the CIS, USRB, EFSD, EAEU, and

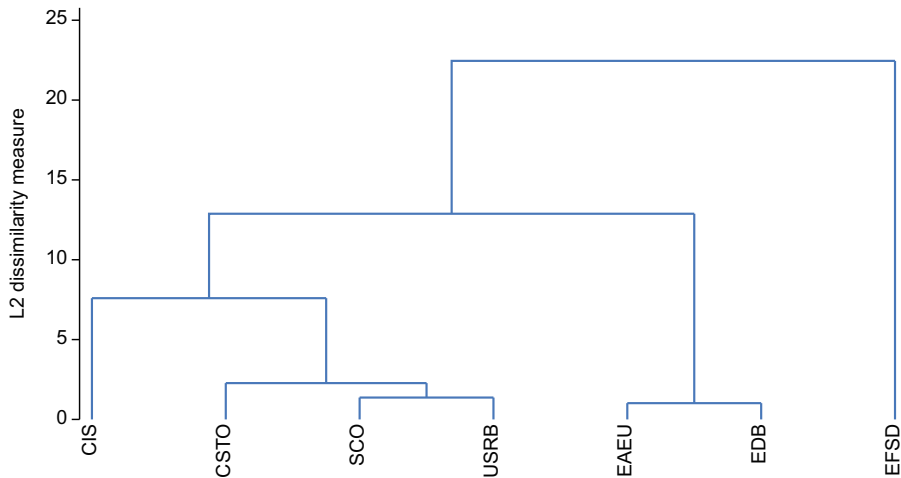
<sup>19</sup> <https://stories.media/investigations/2022/01/31/pora-na-pensiyu/>

EDB, it is much more difficult to make any statements about what the prevalence of military personnel means in terms of the competence of the RO staff. The CSTO could be an appointment for particularly competent general officers or for underperforming ones. Senior staff at the CSTO are somewhat younger than those at the CIS (the average birth year was 1965, i.e., they were approximately 55 years of age at the time of data collection). This means, at the very least, that the member states do not send generals close to retirement (in Russia, the mandatory retirement age is 70 years) to the CSTO. For comparison, the current Chief of the General Staff of the Belarusian Armed Forces was born in 1969, that of the Russian Staff was born in 1955, and that of the Kazakhstani Staff was born in 1965. However, no clear conclusions can be drawn.

Finally, I included the SCO in the sample to check whether the high-ranking officials of an RO, including major extraregional members, differ substantially from other officials. Somewhat surprisingly, this is not the case. As already mentioned, SCO officials are more likely to be career military; furthermore, they are somewhat more likely to be male than CIS officials. In terms of most other characteristics, they do not differ from the CIS officials, including particularly interestingly, having work experience in China. Overall, if one disregards the large presence of security personnel, SCO officials look more like CIS officials than like EAEU or EDB bureaucrats, which could reflect the fact that in the area of economic cooperation, the SCO has thus far remained primarily a rhetorical entity (Vinokurov and Libman 2017), similar to the CIS.



**Fig. 2** Hierarchical cluster analysis of the officials of Eurasian regional organizations (ROs). Ward's clustering and Euclidean distance are applied. Individual officials of the Eurasian ROs are shown on the x-axis. They are sequentially connected to each other: first to the officials who have the most similar characteristics to them, and then to more dissimilar officials. To interpret the results, one must look at sufficiently large groups of officials similar to each other. *CIS* Commonwealth of Independent States, *EAEU* Eurasian Economic Union, *SCO* Shanghai Cooperation Organization, *CSTO* Collective Security Treaty Organization, *USRB* Union State of Russia and Belarus, *EDB* Eurasian Development Bank, *EFSD* Eurasian Fund for the Stabilization and Development



**Fig. 3** Hierarchical cluster analysis of Eurasian regional organizations (ROs). Ward's clustering, Euclidean distance. Individual ROs are shown on the x-axis. They are sequentially connected to each other: first to the ROs who have officials with characteristics most similar to them, and then to more dissimilar officials. To interpret the results, one must look at sufficiently large groups of ROs that are similar to each other. *CIS* Commonwealth of Independent States, *CSTO* Collective Security Treaty Organization, *SCO* Shanghai Cooperation Organization, *USRB* Union State of Russia and Belarus, *EAEU* Eurasian Economic Union, *EDB* Eurasian Development Bank, *EFSD* Eurasian Fund for the Stabilization and Development

Figure 2 reports the results of the HCA for the officials in the sample. The analysis reveals the existence of six large clusters, with officials from different organizations typically belonging to one of those clusters. Counting from left to right, the EAEU, EFSD, and EDB officials are mostly located in clusters 4–6, where they are the majority. The CIS officials dominate cluster 1, and USRB officials dominate cluster 3; CSTO officials are scattered throughout multiple clusters and are particularly present in clusters 2 and 3. This again confirms the existence of two large groups of economic ROs in Eurasia: one consisting of the EAEU, EDB, and EFSD and one including the CIS and USRB, with the security ROs gravitating toward the second group in terms of the characteristics of their officials.

Figure 3 replaces the individuals with organizations as the units of analysis for performing the HCA. This time, several groups of ROs can again be identified. One organization, the EFSD, stands out most likely because of its officials being particularly young and predominantly Western educated or having professional experience in the West. The EAEU and the EDB constitute yet another cluster, as do the CIS, USRB, CSTO, and SCO. Importantly, “old” economic ROs (CIS and USRB) and security ROs (CSTO and SCO) have more similar personnel than “old” and “new” economic ROs (EAEU, EDB, and EFSD versus the CIS and USRB). This step of our analysis, unlike the previous steps, clearly locates the CSTO and the SCO in the group to which the CIS and the USRB also belong.

The analysis seems to reveal the existence of two very different groups of economic ROs in Eurasia despite their very similar official mandates. The CIS and the USRB are primarily populated by old Soviet-era bureaucrats, and the EDB, EFSD,

and EAEU are populated by younger officials, more frequently with Western and private sector experience. The conclusions with respect to the SCO and the CSTO are less clear, but as Fig. 3 shows, they seem to be more similar to the CIS and the USRB than to the EFSD, EDB, and EAEU.

These observations seem to closely match my hypotheses: The EAEU, EDB, and EFSD are policy-oriented ROs, and the USRB and CIS are rhetorical ones. While my analysis does not allow us to identify the particular direction of causality, two options seem to be plausible. On the one hand, the governments of Eurasian countries could have selected younger officials with greater international and private sector experience for the new ROs they also expected to produce more tangible outcomes; older ROs, from which purely rhetorical contributions were expected, remained the domain of older Soviet-era bureaucrats. On the other hand, younger Western-trained officials could also have self-selected into younger organizations out of the belief that their expertise would be more valued there.<sup>20</sup>

The following example illustrates the extreme differences between the “old” and “new” economic ROs in Eurasia. The chairman of the Economic Commission of the CIS is Vladimir Semashko, who was born in 1949. Semashko received his degree in engineering at the Belarusian Polytechnical Institute and worked as chief engineer of the NPO Integral, which was located in Minsk and was one of the largest electronics producers in the USSR (but was desperately lagging behind the electronics producers from Europe, the United States, and Japan) at the time that the Soviet Union collapsed. In 2001, he became the Minister of Energy of Belarus; in 2018, he was appointed as the Belarusian ambassador to Russia and simultaneously accepted his post at the Economic Commission. Most of Semashko’s career was in public administration or in state-owned companies, so he had no experience working in Western states and moved to the CIS after the end of his career in Belarusian public administration—an appointment closely resembling honorary retirement.

The head of the Department of Macroeconomic Policy of the EAEU, Askar Japparkulov, has had an entirely different career. He was born in 1981 and graduated from Taraz State University in Kazakhstan with a degree in law; he also holds a master’s degree in financial economics from the University of Leicester. Between 2001 and 2011, he held various positions in the private sector and in the public sector; between 2011 and 2018, he worked for the Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan, primarily in the Macroeconomic Analysis and Forecasting division. He moved to the EAEC at the age of 39, long before the end of his career, and the appointment seems to clearly match his qualifications and professional experience.

There are officials in the EAEU who differ substantially from Japparkulov<sup>21</sup>; however, the average quantitative indicators reported in this section clearly show a substantial difference between the old and the new generations of Eurasian regionalism. They also confirm the main argument of this paper: The functions of

<sup>20</sup> This, in turn, would be advantageous for career purposes or will allow for achieving greater self-actualization.

<sup>21</sup> Thus, his immediate superior—Minister for Integration and Macroeconomics—is Sergei Glaz’nev, a Russian politician and researcher known for his ultraprotectionist, nationalist, and statist rhetoric; see Åslund (2013).

authoritarian ROs are likely to be better identifiable if one looks at their personnel rather than at their official mandates.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper proceeded from an important empirical challenge: the existence of different types of authoritarian ROs in terms of their implied functions, which have similar official mandates. Some authoritarian ROs are purely symbolic and have the goal of legitimizing autocratic regimes; others pursue substantial goals of economic and political integration. Distinguishing these ROs could be a nontrivial task.<sup>22</sup> This paper suggests that the difference between these ROs can be identified by looking at their personnel. The selection of officials for key positions in ROs reveals the logic of regimes with respect to these ROs: While rhetorical ROs can be populated by bureaucrats without the necessary expertise and qualifications, policy-oriented ROs are likely to have better-qualified officials.

Information on RO officials is, in many cases, relatively limited and difficult to collect. In this paper, I use a novel database of more than 100 officials of ROs in post-Soviet Eurasia that covers five primarily economic ROs (CIS, USB, EAEU, EDB, and EFSD) and two ROs from the security sphere (SCO and CSTO). The CIS and the USB are universally seen as rhetorical ROs. The EAEU, EDB, and EFSD are more frequently interpreted as policy-oriented ones. The analysis of the composition of the bureaucracy of these organizations indeed demonstrates substantial differences: Officials of the EAEU, EDB, and EFSD are younger and more likely to have experience in Western countries or in the private sector. Whereas positions in the CIS and USB seem to be close to honorary retirement, positions in the EAEU, EDB, and EFSD are part of the ongoing careers of officials in their respective fields. The CSTO and SCO are closer to the CIS and USB than to the EAEU, EDB, and EFSD; at least for the CSTO, this fits the widespread perception of this organization as being rather inefficient.

I do not argue that there is a causal link between the appointment of more-competent bureaucrats and the greater ability of an RO to act as a policy-oriented RO. The evidence is rather correlational between the policy-oriented nature of an RO and the competence of bureaucrats. There may be numerous unobserved confounders precluding me from making a causal claim, such as the resources provided to the RO by the member states or the willingness to comply with the decisions of the RO at the national level. Furthermore, whether an RO is policy oriented or rhetorical depends on the functions of other ROs. However, it was not the goal of the paper to claim that the performance of the ROs is ultimately determined by the competence of their staff; rather, I wanted to show that the competence of the staff can serve

<sup>22</sup> The relevance of this question goes beyond the purely scientific debate. Should the EU, for example, engage in dialogue with authoritarian ROs (as it does with many ROs worldwide in its effort to promote integration initiatives in various regions), or should it refrain from such dialogue because doing so would only legitimize the “empty shells” of ROs created by autocrats to legitimize their rule? (See, e.g., Arynov et al. 2024 on the discussion of the interaction between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union.)

as an indication that an RO is created with the objective of being a policy-oriented one. This is an important and interesting research task as well.

The approach suggested in this paper is, of course, not the only way to study the functioning of authoritarian ROs or to address the mismatch between its official goals and actual practices. However, it could contribute to the triangulation, and in some cases (for example, when tools such as interviews with officials are difficult to use, which is, in fact, the case for the Russia-led ROs after 2022) play a very important role in uncovering the hidden differences between ROs. The personnel selection perspective is of crucial importance in studying the adaptation and resilience of ROs and is one where comparative regionalism could in fact be informed by EU studies, where this perspective is more developed.

**Acknowledgements** The author appreciates the very helpful comments of the participants of the conferences of the DVPW AKER working group and DVPW IB section in 2023. He furthermore thanks Maria Merk for excellent research assistance. All mistakes remain my own. The research was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation), project number 444058835.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

**Conflict of interest** A. Libman declares that he has no competing interests.

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