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In our (frozen) backyard: the Eurasian Union and regional environmental governance in the Arctic

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Abstract
Regional environmental governance has emerged as a viable alternative to supranational environmental solutions, using regional and local knowledge and actors to tailor more effective policies. This does not deny a role for supranational institutions, however, which can enable their members to effectively shift towards such a decentralized and polycentric approach. In specific regions such as the Arctic, with many national and local actors interested in environmental improvement, such impetus from meta-organizations (i.e., organizations comprised of organizations) could result in beneficial environmental outcomes. This paper examines an underutilized institution, the Eurasian Union (EaEU), and the role it currently plays in facilitating regional environmental governance. Focusing on its largest member, Russia—and the only member with an Arctic linkage—I explore the tension between supranational facilitation and interference in an area not directly affecting all members. Despite explicit Russian interest in this realm, the EaEU may be able to influence Russian environmental policy for the better via multilateral means and internal mechanisms. By challenging the Russian monopoly on Arctic policy in the EaEU, these additional voices may create space for environmental innovation in areas not central to Russia's interests.

Keywords Regional environmental governance · Russia · Arctic · Decentralization · Polycentrism · Eurasian Union

1 Introduction

Environmental governance remains a challenge for policymakers due to both the multifaceted nature of environmental issues and the various layers and levels of governance which can be addressed. While a new environmental approach took hold in many developed economies in the 1990s and early 2000s, focusing on market-based and flexible governance (Esty 2017), at the supranational level, a reliance on highly centralized and technocratic solutions has continued to predominate (Wurzel et al. 2019). With transboundary issues

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such as air pollution and, most prominently, climate change taking center stage in international negotiations—and as a priority of regional and international organizations—this trend towards centralization and top-down solutions has only accelerated. Indeed, despite the difficulties in enforcement and fragmentation which necessarily accompanies international environmental treaties (Scott 2011), the command-and-control approach has become a hallmark of international environmental governance. Unfortunately, this has also resulted in questionable outcomes for both environmental governance and the people who rely on the environment for their livelihoods (Brondizio and Tourneau 2016) while creating obstacles to reaching a broad-based consensus internationally (Baber and Bartlett 2015).

However, the trend towards economic regionalism since the mid-2000s, occasioned by the slow progress of multilateral trade liberalization (Hartman 2013), has created various different regional groupings and "meta-organizations" (Ahrne and Brunsson 2005), that is, organizations comprised of other organizations (in this case, nation-states). This explosion in the diversity of economic governance mechanisms has also led to a proliferation of mechanisms to tackle regional environmental issues at a level below the global approach of multilateral talks, focusing on work that can be done in the mezzanine tier between global solutions and the nation-state (Yoo and Kim 2016). More importantly, the regional emphasis embodied in regional economic integration organizations also allows for a multiplicity of actors to be involved in solutions at a more local level (Heikkila et al. 2018) working in concert with similarly affected units across borders which may introduce important elements of polycentrism into environmental governance (Ostrom 2010a and 2010b; Libman and Obydenkova 2014).

The Arctic region, generally accepted as the northern polar regions of the planet above the Arctic Circle, encompasses over 16.5 million square kilometers of land and sea; bordering eight different countries[1] and home to over four million people, the Arctic is an (imprecisely defined but) delineated territory which faces a wide variety of environmental issues, complicated by the presence of so many actors and international borders. In particular, the mixture of marine ecosystems and land means that the Arctic faces environmental challenges across the spectrum, including any overall changes in climate, accumulation of (man-made) toxic substances, and preservation of biodiversity (Bancheva 2019). Against these environmental imperatives is the manifest bounty of a natural resource-rich region, meaning that any form of environmental governance in the Arctic must balance environmental and economic imperatives. This can extend beyond the "normal" trade-off of manufacturing/production and resource consumption and also encompass exploration and even tourism (Golubchikov et al. 2019; Saarinen and Varnajot 2019). And standing at this economy/environment nexus in the Arctic is a wide diversity of human governance regimes throughout the region.

It is precisely this diversity of human governance regimes in the Arctic that is the subject of this paper, and in particular the governance arrangements and choices of one specific country in the Arctic region, the Russian Federation. After a false start towards becoming a liberal democracy in the 1990s, the Russian Federation has become an increasingly autocratic and authoritarian country (Fish 2018). While its internal political institutions have become more insular, however, it has joined the march of countries towards greater regional integration, being the driving force behind the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU, e.g., Libman and Obydenkova 2013, 2018b). The EaEU is an

[1] Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Russia, and the USA.

active presence in many states of the former Soviet Union, extending a supranational institutional apparatus to issues such as economic relations and even environmental protection; moreover, the EaEU also exists within a web of overlapping regional organizations launched by both Russia and China, adding complexities for global governance (Libman and Obydenkova 2021a, 2021b). Founded to foster economic integration, it has had some success in lowering internal barriers to trade and movement of people, albeit in a very tightly controlled manner (Dragneva and Hartwell 2022).

This paper extends recent literature on regional and international organizations as actors in environmental governance (Obydenkovka 2022a and 2022b) to a specific regional organization which has been overall unconcerned with the environmental oversight of the Arctic region but could play a constructive role, namely the EaEU. Politically, Russia is an outsized player within the EaEU, seeing the regional integration organization as a vehicle for its own interests rather than building a mechanism for increased coordination or liberalization (Dragneva and Hartwell 2021; Hartwell 2016). At the same time, Russia is also the only member of the EaEU with direct interests in the Arctic: the Russian Federation has an Arctic coastline which stretches for 24,410 km, accounting for over half (53%) of the total coastline of the Arctic, while its administrative "Arctic Zone" (AZRF) comprises 5 million square kilometers, with a population of 2.5 million people. Thus, in absolute terms, Russia is the largest player in the Arctic region but, theoretically, is also part of a regional grouping which could play an active role in all transboundary environmental issues (Hartwell 2021), even in the Arctic.

Perhaps not surprisingly, our analysis finds that a regional grouping such as the EaEU is only as effective in regional environmental governance as their members want it to be; in the specific case of the Arctic and the Eurasian Economic Union, Russia has treated its policies towards the region more as a "reserved" rather than "delegated" power (to use the language of the European Union), ignoring the EaEU when it benefited its emphasis on extraction rather than preservation (Lavelle 2021). However, what is of interest is that the EaEU does have levers to influence Russian Arctic policy, especially in the spaces that the Russian government has neglected and/or abandoned, but also in the multilateral fora which Russia has continued to participate in. In this area, it is imperative that other EaEU members with a more environmentally friendly bent focus on the small-scale, polycentric initiatives which Russia so badly needs to break out of its centralized, top-down mindset. To put it another way, breaking the Russian monopoly on Arctic policy across the EaEU may not yield massive gains, but the mere act of introducing different actors and interests into the process might encourage more environmentally friendly initiatives.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: the next section gives a brief overview of environmental governance and the theory of regional organizations in this realm, while Section 3 focuses on the EaEU as an environmental actor. Section 4 magnifies this even further by examining Russia's Arctic policies and, crucially, how the EaEU can/cannot influence Russian approaches. Section 5 offers some concluding thoughts and areas for future research.

2 Regional organizations and environmental governance

Environmental policy has traditionally been thought of as the purview of governments, a staple of domestic policies determined via the polity and their representatives (Kraft 2017); any move towards international environment policy, and in particular multilateral treaties,

are thus derived from the political processes within each particular country (DeSombre 2000) and are subjected to these same processes in terms of implementation (Perkins and Neumayer 2007). This uni-directionality has been somewhat challenged in by those who acknowledge that multilateral treaties may also alter domestic political processes, constraining and restricting the set of policies available to policymakers (see McGinnis (2000) on international environmental law) or, alternatively, by creating incentives for harmonization of standards or diffusion of best practices (Busch and Jörgens 2005).

Added to these drivers of environmental policy must now be other international organizations, as a new burgeoning literature has posited international organizations as environmental actors unto themselves. While multilateral organizations have been examined in the political and environmental science literature since the 1990s as key players in the driving of democratization and environmental standards (Haas et al. 1993; Bartlett et al. 1995; Lankina et al. 2016; Nazarov and Obydenkova 2022), the new emphasis has been on organizations such as regional trade agreements or economic integration bodies rather than exclusively multilateral approaches (see, for example, Glantz (2013) and Krampe and Mobjörk (2018)). The shift of emphasis to regional organizations has occurred at the same time that multilateralism has fallen out of favor globally, with various political currents and crises slowing the once-heady rush towards multilateralism that characterized the 1990s and early 2000s. This literature tends to focus on the largest examples of this trend, in particular the European Union and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, environmental actors with a substantial impact internally and on the environmental reform agenda in post-Communist states (e.g., Knill and Tosun (2009); Obydenkova et al. (2022)).

But beyond merely being a substitute for broader globalization, regionalism and in particular the role that regional organizations can play in environmental policy have much to offer in terms of improving environmental outcomes (Conca 2012). In the first instance, regional organizations have the same benefits as multilateral organizations, in that they can address transboundary environmental issues more effectively than at the solely domestic or bilateral level. Climatic change, air and water pollution, and other environmental problems have assumed a less circumscribed nature in a globalized world, affecting several jurisdictions simultaneously and calling for coordinated solutions.[2] Regional organizations, as groupings of administrative regions of various sizes, have an advantage in addressing these transboundary issues by bringing relevant actors together at the national level. While still encompassing some of the problems of aggregation, in that environmental issues (even transboundary ones) might be better solved via smaller-scale initiatives among affected regions (rather than escalating them up to the national level and then connecting with other national governments), the regionalism approach is still effective helping to solve the coordination barriers preventing precisely these smaller-scale initiatives.[3]

Similarly, the "economies of scale" benefit from regionalism is similar to that from multilateralism, in that it can reach more people and ecosystems via harmonization than at the individual or bilateral level. A criticism of this benefit would be that regionalism necessarily delivers a smaller impact than a multilateral approach, if both approaches were

[2] On the other hand, the proliferation of political boundaries has perhaps artificially made environmental issues more "transboundary" than they need to be; at the same time, regression in the application and protection of property rights has also made it more difficult to solve transboundary issues at the individual or local level, as would be possible under the Coase (1960) theorem.

[3] These barriers are usually generated at the level of the national government rather than regionally, meaning that the national government needs to be involved to remove them.

to cover the same issues, due to the larger reach of a multilateral treaty or organization. In this instance, while a regional organization might push back the "boundary" in "transboundary," a multilateral approach might have greater success in eliminating the issue altogether. However, an appropriate rejoinder is the reality that many regional organizations have much more developed sanctioning and compliance mechanisms than "lowest common denominator" multilateral arrangements, with the European Union being a prime example (see Knill and Tosun (2009) for an excellent exposition of the mechanisms of the EU in environmental policy; see Nazarov and Obydenkova (2022) and Mišić and Obydenkova (2022) for EU environmental impact on post-Communist states). Whereas compliance and defection are difficult to monitor in a broad multilateral agreement, within an integrated organization such as the EU—or really any regional integration organization which has supranational institutions or a bargaining chip such as trade barriers—environmental policy can be better policed and, crucially, harmonized. If, in theory, a regional organization is a collection of voluntary actors, then solving collective action problems (while still substantial) may be more promising in a regional environment (Conca 2012), where other levers exist (Kelemen 2009).

A further argument in favor of regional organizations influencing environmental policy is that they have the benefit of more reasonable scale for tackling environmental issues, more able "to promote the diffusion of ideas, the development of institutions, and social mobilization for change" by dint of their limited membership (Conca 2012:127). While the EU is often taken as a prime example of the environmental benefits of scaling (Obydenkova 2022a), it is less to do with the somewhat unwieldy 27 member states and the existence of supranational institutions and more to do with (a) the enshrining of subsidiarity as a governance function off the EU and, perhaps more importantly, (b) the creation of an open and somewhat borderless space which encourages localized solutions. Given that "global environmental change has spatially variable implications and that suitable adaptation measures may best be tailored for specific regions" (Balsiger and Prys 2016:241), the EU and some (but not all, see below) other regional organizations provide the flexibility to be able to tailor these adaptation measures.

This point leads us to perhaps the greatest benefit which regionalism may provide, appropriately described as a governance end unto itself, namely the use of polycentrism to tackle environmental issues. That is, rather than necessarily focusing on the immediate environmental outcomes encouraged by regional organizations (although crucial), regionalism may allow for better processes in achieving these outcomes by combining both appropriate scale and subsidiarity (Warner et al. 2014). Polycentrism is more than decentralization of environmental management, although this is a substantial component, in that it allows for overlapping and different poles of power, layers, and entryways for environmental action. It is in many ways superior to a top-down approach because "a polycentric order such as the market may be more effective at facilitating the spread of new ideas and values than a hierarchical or majoritarian system which can at most conduct consecutive experiments where there is only one, or very few, options to which all must subscribe" (Pennington 2008:435). While polycentrism is not necessarily a panacea for all environmental issues, especially in situations where one layer of governance (usually the federal or national level) dominates others (see da Silveira and Richards (2013)), even in the presence of transboundary issues such as climate change, it can allow for coordination and information sharing necessary for environmental management (Baltutis and Moore 2019). Creating an integrated regional space via organizations such as the EU allows for polycentrism to flourish, even though it may not necessarily be the goal or the explicit objective (Rayner and Jordan 2013).

A word of caution is needed before we move on, however, and that is that much of the theory outlined here on the benefits of regional organizations for environmental outcomes is predicated on voluntary, democratic, and liberal integration. Recent studies have highlighted the growing trend of "autocratic" or "illiberal" regionalism (Debre 2021; Libman and Obydenkova 2018a), where non-democracies pursue economic integration in a manner to the liberal integration of earlier waves of globalization. As the goals of such autocratic regionalism are different—including helping an autocratic regime to survive—and the modalities also are very different (managed rather than market-based integration, see Dragneva and Hartwell (2021)), it is perhaps not surprising that the outcomes of such integration are also different.

This in particular would apply to environmental issues, where there is evidence that democracies are more likely to translate the preferences of their citizens into environmental outcomes via the democratic process (Von Stein 2022). Indeed, the incentives for environmental policy in an autocracy should diverge substantially from more democratic regimes, and there is evidence for divergence in environmental outcomes as well (Fredriksson and Wollscheid 2007; Hartwell and Coursey 2015). Pervasive corruption and rent-seeking in autocratic regimes can make it far less likely that autocracies will favor environmental protection (Escher and Walter-Rogg 2020), meaning it is a short leap to assuming that groups of autocracies will also downgrade environmental policy unless it is collectively useful or explicitly demanded by the public, usually in the aftermath of environmental conflicts (e.g., Dubuisson 2020; Demchuk et al. 2022). What is instead usually detected is rhetorical lip service paid to environmental commitments set up by democratic regional organizations, such as the EU, but without corresponding behavioral changes (e.g., Ambrosio et al. 2022, Hall et al. 2022; Obydenkova 2022a, 2022b).

This need not always be the case—Wurster (2022) carefully considers where democracies have serious deficits in environmental progress and where autocracies have improved environmental outcomes —and for a collection of autocracies, it is possible that the most powerful among them can drive positive environmental outcomes (as with China in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, see Agostinis and Urdinez (2021)). In addition, another key way in which autocratic regionalism may encourage environmental progress is if the regionalism generates a space for polycentrism and cross-border cooperation on transboundary issues (Börzel and Risse 2019), creating an area for movement that benefits from the neglect of the sovereign rather than by its active participation. Thus, the involvement of regional illiberal organizations in environmental policy may not contribute directly towards environmental improvement via conventional, formal, state-centric means; at the same time, however, by generating cross-border cooperation and additional poles of power outside of vertical national political structures, there may be scope for even illiberal regionalism to make progress with environmental outcomes.

3 The Eurasian Union as an environmental actor

As noted above, the Eurasian Economic Union is a regional international organization with direct interests in overall environmental governance, but in particular with reference to Arctic and sub-Arctic climatic zones. After a decade and a half of half-hearted and piecemeal integration initiatives within the former Soviet states (see Hartwell (2013) and Dragneva and Wolczuk (2015) for a good summation), the EaEU was created in 2015 as an extension of the customs union between Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus (in existence since 2010)

but with the addition of Armenia and Kyrgyzstan as founding members (Tarr 2016). More importantly, the EaEU took a major step beyond its predecessor, the Eurasian Economic Community (founded in 2000 with the explicit goal of completing the customs union), to fashion a supranational organization along the lines of the European Union (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2015; Libman and Obydenkova 2018b). In particular, this meant the creation of specific supranational institutions including the Eurasian Economic Commission (the executive arm), a Court of the Eurasian Economic Union (judicial), and, crucially, the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB), founded in 2006 but brought under the EaEU in 2015 as a key financing mechanism (Vinokurov 2017; Ambrosio et al. 2022).

Much as with the European Union it was modeled on, the EaEU theoretically operates on a system of "reserved" and "delegated" powers, with some areas reserved for the constituent states and other delegated to the Eurasian Economic Commission in order to forge a common policy; in particular, the EaEU has extensive powers in "tariff and customs regulation, technical regulation and the imposition of trade defense measures" (Dragneva 2022:227). Indeed, the greatest successes in the EaEU's existence have been in the trade realm, driven by the explicit desires of its members and, in particular, by its two largest members, Russia and Kazakhstan.[4] However, unlike the EU, the delegation of powers within the EaEU does not extend to environmental policy, a point that Hartwell (2021) has noted in the context of the EaEU's approach to environmental governance: while environmental protection is included in discrete areas in the treaty founding the EaEU (Obydenkovka (2022b) notes that the treaty has extensive references to sustainable development, while Hall et al. (2022) show precisely the emphasis on the environment), a unified environmental policy is lacking. In reality, the environmental sphere has been added in bits and pieces to the existing multilateral structure, considered only in terms of its relation to central delegated powers such as trade, with sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures harmonized, along with veterinary standards and some specific aspects of epidemiological welfare (Navasardova et al. 2022). In the annexes to the EaEU treaty, environmental issues connected with the energy trade—crucial to EaEU members—are also mentioned, but again as part of a technical area rather than as a subject of concern itself (Piskulova 2021). Obydenkovka (2022b:4) notes that the lip service paid to environmental issues at the supranational level in the Eurasian Union "points to mimicry on the part of the EaEU rather than to the actual diffusion of environmental values." And despite the emphasis from committed Eurasianists within Russia that "sustainable development" should be a sustaining core of the Eurasian Union (Nemtsev 2015), this ideological fervor has been lacking in policymakers tasked with the practical aspects of integration.

This fragmented approach has meant that environmental policy within the EaEU has been set via piecemeal initiatives and (most commonly) via the member states of the EaEU. With regard to the first avenue, a more comprehensive approach, grounded in a cross-border parliamentary initiative, was begun to coordinate EaEU policies in 2014, before the union was officially launched (Akopova et al. 2018), and the Eurasian Economic Commission has provided aspirational strategies in areas such as benchmarking the EaEU against the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (produced in 2017). However, the exigencies of the EaEU apparatus, and in particular the need for unanimity among members to delegate environmental policies (Klofat 2017), have led to very little being accomplished in

[4] As any Kazakh will tell you, the impetus for Eurasian integration originally came from Kazakhstan, with former President Nursultan Nazarbayev pushing for an economic union of former Soviet states almost since the very moment that the USSR's republics became "former Soviet states." This was codified in a speech in 1994 in Moscow, laying out the basis for a proposed Eurasian Union (Mostafa 2013).

terms of actual harmonization of mechanisms or even legislation (Selishcheva et al. 2018). The sticking point in this process has not been the legal authorization for such a multilateral approach for, as Antiufeeva et al. (2019) note, the legal framework for cross-border cooperation in environmental governance has already been set within the EaEU and its treaty; the problem is instead encapsulated with the issue of regulation of such initiatives, and which jurisdiction can be used to enforce any transgressions of environmental policy, an issue which could be settled with further regional efforts (Efimtseva 2019). However, this remains controversial and may argue for the EaEU's continued attention but with the actual technical and supporting work done by non-state actors.

This obstacle has also manifested itself in the few institutional initiatives which have attempted to transpose support of environmental protection into strategy and operational documents of EaEU bodies. The largest example in this direction comes from the Eurasian Development Bank, which began a move towards encouraging (but not requiring) environmental responsibility in 2007 but, like the EaEU in general, has approached environmental impact in a desultory manner (Ambrosio et al. 2022). Keeping in line with the EaEU as an economically focused union, designed to deliver better results for the political leaders of each member state (Dragneva and Hartwell 2021), the similarly belated move by the Eurasian Economic Commission towards bringing ideas of "sustainability" from the UN 2030 Agenda into Eurasian policymaking has been built on existing EaEU mechanisms; in particular, the focus has been on utilizing trade and integration for technological innovation and dissemination rather than setting a tangible framework for environmental governance (Shugurov 2018).

All of these issues do not mean that the EaEU has no role to play in shaping future approaches to environmental challenges, but merely that the mechanisms, perhaps by design—and with the major exception of the Eurasian Development Bank—are conspicuously absent. With a basis for influence from the EaEU but no harmonized mechanisms or specific delegation for the EaEU to act in the environmental sphere, environmental policies within the union have instead been crafted at the member state level; where cross-border cooperation has occurred, it has been either scaled up to multilateral initiatives (such as the Paris Accords) or limited to bilateral treaties among members. Indeed, this approach to environmental governance mirrored the very beginning of the EaEU: as Dragneva and Wolczuk (2017:2) noted, "The rapid launch of the union was made possible through bilateral deals initiated by Russia with individual member countries rather than any particular appetite for integration from member states." This approach has meant that the scope of environmental focus has been limited to issues which are important for the dyad in question rather than taken holistically across the entire trading zone, an oversight when one considers that the performance of the EaEU in fostering green outcomes has not been excellent (Hartwell 2021). Ironically, the integration organization that has had the most focus on environmental policy in the former Soviet Union has not been the EaEU but the EU, offering billions of euros of support via various Partnership agreements for improved environmental policy (Konopelko 2018).

In line with the theory noted in Section 2, the lack of effective supranational organizations has also kept polycentric approaches to a minimum within the EaEU. This is due mainly to an intrinsic attribute of the Eurasian Union that we have thus far overlooked, namely the domestic political institutions within each EaEU member state. The EaEU is well-known for being a collection of autocracies (Dragneva and Hartwell 2022) and thus personifies the "autocratic regionalism" spoken of in the political science literature. However, the EaEU member states still go through the drama (to various extents) of formal elections (Reuter and Szakonyi 2019), meaning that a narrowly circumscribed policy space

is available for civil society or indeed anyone who does not toe the party line. Such "competitive autocracies" require the ruling class to focus on policies across the board which support the ruling regime rather than encourage broad-based improved performance (Buckley and Reuter 2019).

When applied to the environmental sphere, leaving environmental challenges, even transboundary ones such as climatic change, in the hands of such political institutions means that environmental governance will be highly centralized and connected with specific areas of interest to the ruling class rather than society. This trend is rather similar to socio-political development in other post-Communist states, with pronounced legacies of lack of transparency, lack of accountability, corruption, and highly centralized decision-making (e.g., Dubuisson 2020; Iman et al. 2022; Mišić and Obydenkova 2022; Demchuk et al. 2022). For example, climate change in Russia has been treated as a "subset of issues within the spheres of foreign or security policy" (Simola 2020:4) and seen as an unmitigated positive in terms of possibly opening new routes for shipping and hydrocarbon exploration (Zhiltsov 2021).

In a fortuitous turn of events for humanity in general, even authoritarian governance leaves cracks in its coverage of issues, creating space for other actors and powers to enter the areas which have not been designated as a priority (Chan et al., 2021). As noted at the end of the last section, regionalism under authoritarian governance is not guaranteed to bring environmental improvement, and this appears to be the case specifically within the confines of the EaEU, mainly due to its weak institutional apparatus and the reluctance of the autocrats at the helm of its member states to challenge each other in areas of direct interest. However, bringing these two facts together may suggest that there is a benefit to the EaEU in entering the environmental realm more wholeheartedly, resorting to a favored notion of economists, namely competition. Eichhorn and Linhart (2022) note that there is substantial heterogeneity among autocracies, and this heterogeneity translates into different approaches to environmental protection; thus, just because Belarusian leader Lukashenka has no environmental priorities does not mean that Kazakh leader Tokayev will feel the same way. Greater involvement of the EaEU in certain environmental policies may thus encourage progress, especially in areas where other members are not engaged. Perhaps more importantly, even in autocracies, if the state is not readily present in an area like the environment, non-state actors can act as "issue entrepreneurs" and create progress (Yew and Zhu, 2019).

4 The Arctic region, the EaEU, and the Russian obstacle

4.1 Russia, the Arctic, and environmental challenges

The Arctic region provides a special issue of concern for supranational environmental governance within the framework of the EaEU, mainly because governance in the Arctic only directly affects and (in reality) concerns one member, Russia. At the same time, as a multifaceted arena spanning both marine and land-based ecosystems, the Arctic or Polar region faces several environmental challenges related to climatic change and human activity which are transboundary and which *should* be of interest to EaEU members—in fact, as we will see, EaEU members have already declared their interest in many of the challenges in the Arctic via their accession to international treaty regimes. The question is whether or

not the EaEU has the ability to do so in both the short- and longer-term, given the weaknesses of the EaEU as an institutional body.

Russia's Arctic policy since the collapse of the Soviet Union must be seen in the context of its broader environmental policy, which has been mainly subordinated to its interests in resource extraction and utilization rather than environmental protection per se, as well as its neo-imperial military ambitions globally (Roi 2010), which seem to remain as its key historical legacy (Lavelle 2021). While Russia's independence showed a move towards greater awareness of environmental needs, reflected in legislation and civil society and occasional public protests (Glushenkova 1999; Dubuisson 2020; Demchuk et al. 2022), the extreme centralization which accompanied the rise of Vladimir Putin led to a period of "environmental de-institutionalization" (Mol 2009), whereby tenets of environmental protection were de-emphasized from overall policy processes and environmental institutions within the Federation were marginalized. Where the governance of environmental issues in Russia did happen at the federal level, it followed "a policy process characterized by high levels of intervention from political leadership, frequent changes in direction, and an insular decision-making context with only limited input from environmental actors" (Martus 2017:137). Underpinning this approach was the reality that, as Tokunaga (2010) noted, Russian policymakers cared about ecological improvement in the short term (in highly visible manifestations), so long as environmental policy agreed with the imperatives of extraction and resource use on which the Russian economy is based (Hartwell et al. 2021).

This approach has also colored Russia's policies towards the varied environmental challenges in the Arctic region. The Arctic region is well known for being perhaps one of the most sensitive areas to climatic change (Hinzmann et al. 2005), with any climate shifts globally amplified in the Arctic region, leading to adaptation and changes in both marine (Wassmann et al. 2011) and terrestrial ecosystems (Post et al. 2009). The legacy of previous Soviet industrialization policies within and adjoining the Arctic region has cast a long shadow on Russia's policies in the region, as "under state enterprise since the 1930s the Arctic [was] subjected to a ruthless policy of development with little regard for environmental considerations or the needs of either native or migratory workforces" (Arikaynen 1991:17). It was not until the late Gorbachev period that Russian policymakers signaled a willingness to collaborate internationally on Arctic issues (Stokke and Hønneland 2007), perhaps as a way to examine the effects of unrestricted dumping by the Soviets of military waste (including nuclear waste) into the Arctic Ocean for years prior (Chance and Andreeva 1995). Despite this late start, and the actions which preceded it, by 1991, the Soviets were a party to 95 separate treaties or conventions concerned with the Arctic, with 36 concerned exclusively with environmental protection and conservation (and the bulk of these on a multilateral basis, see Osherenko (1989)).

The importance of the Arctic region to the modern Russian economy cannot be understated, as it contributes between 12 and 20% of total Russian GDP in a given year, comprises a full 20% of Russian exports, and is the source for 80% of Russia's gas exports (Trenin 2020). In the post-Soviet environment, and especially under Putin, Russia's Arctic policy has reverted to being filtered through the lens of great power competition once again (Roi 2010), as evidenced by the 2020 in a decree of the President on "Foundations of the Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic for the Period up to 2035." In this document, the explicit goals of Russia in the Arctic hinge on "developing the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation as a strategic resource base, and its sustainable use to accelerate the economic growth of the Russian Federation" (Decree by the President of the Russian Federation 2020:4). Within this goal of a "resource base," the Arctic is envisaged not only as a basin for untapped natural resources but also for control of sea routes (Sergunin and

Konyshev 2015), thereby fulfilling the first goal of the strategy, namely the preservation of Russian "territorial integrity."[5]

In terms of the environment, the Russian 2035 strategy contains references to "the expansion of special environmental regimes and environmental protection regulations in the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation," but in general, these broad platitudes are lost in a strategy which is almost exclusively focused on resource development and economic growth. In particular, much of the Decree is devoted to development goals in the AZRF, as it remains one of the poorer (and, it must be noted, environmentally polluted) areas of the Russian Federation. Throughout the zone, mineral extraction and oil and gas mining predominate in terms of economic activity, and these are further supported by current Russian policy, seeking to further develop these industries with only the promise of perhaps upgrading to more environmentally friendly technologies (Lipina et al. 2017). Focusing on mega-projects, infrastructure, and (in particular) energy, the current Russian approach to the Arctic appears to be "re-colonization" (Kinossian 2017), attempting to stave off depopulation via large state-sponsored projects of unknown environmental impact (Makarov and Stepanov 2016). As part of this approach, an emphasis on the rights and responsibilities of indigenous people has risen to the fore (Gladun 2019), touching peripherally on environmental protection in the area of benefit-sharing arrangements (Tysiachniouk et al. 2018) but otherwise keeping environmental issues subordinate to development.

Realistically, given the Russia-centric goals inherent in the 2035 strategy, there is little room for maneuver in a multilateral sense regarding Russia's environmental policy in the Arctic. And yet, Russia has continued to be involved in cross-border cooperation in the Arctic on a number of environmental issues (Roberts 2015), even given the tense international climate that it has generated since 2014, working successfully with the USA and other polar actors (Østhagen 2016). This can be seen in its work in multilateral treaty mechanisms, as Russia has been active in the Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears as well as the Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution, Preparedness, and Response in the Arctic (Pezard et al. 2017), as well as viewing the Arctic Council as an indispensable forum for Arctic issues (Sergunin 2021). Russia has also been active in treaties not explicitly concerned with the environment but where the environment is still a constituent part, such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (Roberts 2015) and especially in the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (Østhagen 2016). Overall, despite the increasing belligerence that Russia has shown on the Eurasian landmass, its policies towards the Arctic have remained surprisingly cooperative, perhaps due to the fact that these policies are seen as a domestic matter within a larger international context rather than a purely international dispute (Roberts 2015). It also may be a matter of pure national interest, as further militarization and destabilization of the polar zones would threaten the economic goals which Putin set out in his 2020 Decree (Pezard et al. 2017).

Crucially, below the level of formal government working groups and delegations—i.e., where the actual environmental work is done—Russia's actions have also been encouraging. Russian scientists have played a leading technical role in various Arctic environmental projects: for example, working with the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Russian academics from Murmansk State Technical University, and civil society from the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) in Russia were instrumental in driving the creation of an emissions inventory for black carbon under the Arctic Black Carbon

[5] Further articles in the strategy speak explicitly of military and troop positioning in the Arctic, emphasizing its military utility to Russia.

Initiative (ABCI). Similarly, the Arctic PASSION project, a European-Russian initiative, also is predicated on data sharing on environmental projects and, until February 2022, included leading Russian Arctic universities contributing their expertise (Witze 2022). Indeed, much as during COVID pandemic (Hartwell et al. 2021), Russia's progress in environmental protection in the Arctic policy has come about because the government has been disengaged in environmental policy, rather than in spite of it. Where the government has committed money, but no attention, local expertise and knowledge have been brought to bear in areas that the Russian government have been unwilling or uninterested in engaging in (*Ibid.*).

More importantly, this cooperation has operated best when targeted at localized environmental issues specific to the Arctic rather than when related to global challenges requiring a "whole of government" responses. The problematic Russian response to climate change has been rife with contradictions: while the Russian government has continued its multilateral involvement in areas of interest to the Arctic (including the Kyoto and Paris Accords on climate change), "internal disputes over Russian climate-related policies and ratification of the Kyoto Protocol seem very much to have been based on differing interdepartmental and intramural assessments regarding the financial and bureaucratic benefits and costs of addressing, honestly and scientifically, global warming and climate change" (ZumBrunnen 2010:70). With regard to the Arctic, however, where climatic change is amplified, more concrete and tangible scientific cooperation has occurred in this field, including under the Russian-American Long-term Census of the Arctic (RUSALCA) program, where Russian scientists have been heavily engaged in monitoring and studying the effects of the shifting Arctic climate in discrete areas in the Arctic zone (Devyatkin 2022). Municipal authorities have also taken the initiative in spurring environmentally friendly programs, as in the town of Salekhard, which has shifted towards the use of recycling, a policy very rare in the AZRF (Orttung et al. 2021), while educators have contributed via the incorporation of sustainability tenets into business education (Ryazanova 2022). Even corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been introduced by Russian firms in a different format than elsewhere in the Russian Federation, focusing on the needs of Arctic settlements and especially environmental issues such as biodiversity (see TotalEnergies projects connected with the Arctic LNG 2 project), although there are major questions—driven as they are by state-owned fossil fuel companies—on whether these CSR initiatives are good for sustainability (Hitztaler and Tynkkynen 2020).

Unfortunately, even this multilateral and private/technical cooperation has been influenced by Russian government policies elsewhere, especially in its invasion of Ukraine. Whereas the first invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014 allowed for compartmentalization of Arctic issues, even as overall relations worsened, the invasion in 2022 has bled into all facets of multilateral cooperation. Such stringent efforts to punish Moscow for its unprovoked aggression have led to cooperation on climatic issues being abandoned simply because of the difficulty of traveling to the AZRF and/or the degradation of data, coupled with restrictions on data sharing among researchers (Witze 2022). In this sense, international cooperation on environmental protection is being stymied by the all-encompassing reality of the Russian invasion.

4.2 Is Russia's Arctic policy up for negotiation?

The invasion of Ukraine has closed many of the multilateral routes by which Russian Arctic policy has traveled over the past three decades, while the Russian government has

redefined its objectives in the region (if they ever were any different) with environmental protection as an afterthought to extraction and development. Given the immense economic interests of the Russian government in the Arctic, and their history of prioritizing technological change over mitigation, can the EaEU played any role in setting the direction or moderating the behavior of its largest member? And should it?

Section 3 has made clear that, at many times during its formation and especially in its implementation, the EaEU has been seen from Moscow not as a pure international or meta-organization, comprised of equal sovereign nations, but as a way for the Russian Federation to extend policies to other countries along its own lines. Indeed, Russia has displayed much different behaviors in terms of its international cooperation (as in the multilateralism shown above) and in its regional behavior, typified by the Eurasian Economic Union. This has been less of an issue for environmental protection, however, mainly because (also as shown above) environmental protection has been less of a delegated power within the Eurasian Union and has instead been reserved to the member states; thus, there has been no supranational consensus for Russia to put its stamp on and/or argue for moving in the Russian direction. Put another way, Russia has been able to assert its own path to environmental protection (for better or for worse) within its own borders without a supranational mechanism to contend with.

This point is crucial when considering how any shift in Arctic environmental governance might occur because Russia is not only *primus inter pares* in the EaEU in terms of political leadership but is the only EaEU member country with an Arctic connection. This connection is not just physical (as noted above) but in some ways spiritual, as espoused by the highly developed nationalistic, xenophobic, and historically suspect ideology of "Eurasianism" which has been embraced by Putin (Pryce 2013), where Russia is a great power which must move in an uncompromising manner and generate economic growth through geopolitical expansion (Morozova 2009; Izotov and Obydenkova 2021). Ironically used as a tool of Russian chauvinism, this Eurasianism has manifested itself in projects such as the Eurasian Economic Union; the paradox here is evident, as it is unclear how the EaEU can operate in the Arctic, an area so intimately connected with Russian interests (and identity!), when the union itself is meant to be a vehicle for Russian "great power" status.[6]

An additional point rears its head here, namely (as noted above in Section 2 and then again in Section 3) whether or not EaEU involvement, as an illiberal grouping, would even be beneficial for environmental outcomes specifically in the Arctic. Would the EaEU just replicate the Russian desire for extraction at the expense of protection, but with the added wrinkle of more actors trying to obtain a piece of the action? This is a distinct possibility, given that the EaEU's tight integration on energy matters—in fact, some may say cheap energy is the only glue holding the EaEU together (Perovic 2019)—is likely to keep the focus in the Arctic on energy exploration and little else (Bianco et al. 2021). Similarly, given that the governance mechanisms of EaEU member states are predicated on supporting the ruling regimes of members rather than creating liberal integration, there would likely be little space to push for environmental innovation, even if Russia was amenable to having the EaEU play a broader role. Finally, as Hartwell (2021) notes, the EaEU's overall record on the environment above and beyond its member state productive capacities is rather bleak, as countries which participated in the customs union and/or the EaEU have

[6] A further paradox, perhaps more humorously, is, if the EaEU is meant to be a tool for spreading Russian influence, why is it based on a western template? What did the EU get right that Russian could not figure out for itself with its superior worldview?

had less efficient (more materials intensive) production than non-EaEU members since the grouping came together.

In spite of these large caveats, there may still be benefits to EaEU involvement in fashioning Arctic environmental policies across a broad range of issues. In the first instance, despite geographic distance, the various policies that Russia undertakes in the Arctic have direct relevance for the EaEU. Indeed, there are compelling interests of many EaEU states in the Arctic, including related to increased shipping and transport across any northern routes and these being linked with a Eurasian inland waterway system (Kenderdine 2021). For some EaEU members such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (and to a far lesser extent, Belarus and Armenia), the interest in the proper balancing of economy and environment in the Arctic should also make them "Arctic powers" in their own right (Kenderdine 2019). EaEU members are themselves party to international conventions such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement; ironically, one of the main reasons behind the EaEU's founding was to create a vehicle for international agreements, see Kirkham (2016). The presence of more countries in the EaEU which have already committed themselves to international treaties (Sementsov and Golysheva 2023) may push a "greener" lens on an Arctic policy which has been heretofore determined by only one of the members. Bringing in a technical and issue-focused approach may also help to push environmental improvement, building cooperation and innovation in the areas which Russia has purposely neglected (due to their lack of relevance to geopolitical goals). Last but not least, emerging rivalries between the Central Asian EaEU members with China, who has increased its own presence and interest in the Arctic as part of the "Belt and Road Initiative" (Erokhin and Tianming 2021), makes the Eurasian Union a more desirable vehicle for negotiations than Russia alone. In reality, Russia has seen China be a "frenemy" (Binder and Payton 2022) more than a staunch ally over Ukraine, making Russia's traditional approach of a firm hand against China less tenable progress (Lukin 2021). If the EaEU were to be more involved, it would possibly force Russia to be more amenable to environmental progress as a way to counter its relatively weaker position vis-à-vis China.

Accepting that there may be benefits to greater EaEU involvement specifically in the Arctic, there are several tangible issues on *how* this can become a reality. The first obstacle is that the interest of other EaEU members in the Arctic has not been fully articulated. As of this writing, not one other member of the Eurasian Union has developed a coherent an Arctic strategy, even though many of them have been active in global dialogues on climate change, with their governments occupied elsewhere with interests directly related to national interest (and, in many cases, regime survival). Similarly, the EaEU—either at the member state level or as an organization—has been conspicuously absent in any Arctic dialogues or fora, even when strictly non-Arctic actors have been invited to or have even joined such dialogues (Chater 2016), including states from "Greater Eurasia," including China and even Poland.

It is unknown if some innate loyalty to Russia within the EaEU (as well as other Russia-led regional organizations, see Obydenkova (2022c) and Overland (2022)) has been retarding this progress towards engaging in the Arctic (Kochtcheeva 2021; Obydenkova 2022c) and whether or not this psychological barrier has been broken by the invasion of Ukraine. But if the EaEU is going to exert any influence on Russia's Arctic policies in terms of the environment, it is incumbent upon EaEU member states to move past this disengagement and involve themselves (individually and collectively) in international and multilateral dialogues on the Arctic, including obtaining observer status in the Arctic Council. Given Russia's willingness to stay engaged in multilateral fora in the Arctic, this could provide an opportunity for Central Asia and Caucasian voices to be heard, bringing in the EaEU via

the back door. More importantly, by involving EaEU members into a process from which they have previously been excluded, they may be able to make progress on the regional aspects of Arctic environmental governance, including agreeing upon internal frameworks (via policy diffusion) which can lead to more sustainable environmental outcomes. This does not mean directly challenging Russia's clearly delineated national interests in the Arctic, especially with regard to the security realm; rather, it should emphasize the creation of the playing field within the EaEU to allow for non-governmental, polycentric, and local solutions to emerge. Given that much environmental progress in Russia has been made only where the state is absent (Hartwell et al. 2021), the goal of the EaEU as a meta-organization should be to highlight the particular environmental issues of relevance in the Arctic rather than institutionalize environmental policy as a whole. This piecemeal approach can then take a step towards fostering the conditions for environmental improvement, not just environmental legislation, allowing for cross-border cooperation on environmental projects and recognizing the polycentricity of the issue.

Another mechanism which can be used internally to further environmental protection in the Arctic is to explicitly embody environmental aims within the Eurasian Development Bank. The EDB, as the financier of many of the mega-projects and infrastructural dreams of the EaEU, has thus far avoided such a role but it can be enshrined by the EaEU in the short term, especially when related to projects in the Arctic (in case adoption of overall environmental precepts is not politically viable at the moment). While Russia has an important role to play in the EDB, it can be outvoted on the Executive Board, meaning that a key tool for environmental protection can be enshrined in relation to the Arctic.

Of course, the elephant in the room here is that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has deepened rifts within the EaEU on critical geopolitical issues, and the EaEU has been of little use in constraining Russia in areas which Russia places as a priority.[7] However, one of the saving graces of any regional or multilateral organization is that it can help to compartmentalize ongoing disputes in one technical area and allow for progress in another (Bercovitch and Sigmund Gartner 2006). With EaEU supranational institutions operating as usual during the invasion and adopting various initiatives (as in the Intergovernmental Council meeting in Minsk in June 2022), a move towards codifying EaEU interest in Arctic environmental governance—beyond merely Russian national security interests and in an area which Russia has de-emphasized as a priority—could still be enabled via strict compartmentalization.

5 Conclusion

The Arctic is a region of competing commercial and environmental interests, one which calls for very specific and yet versatile approaches to governance; in such a diverse and widespread environment, polycentrism and decentralization can be a valuable tool to solving both local and transboundary environmental issues. Paradoxically, one of the benefits of a regional economic grouping such as an integration organization can be to foster these localized solutions, narrowing focus to region-specific problems while also encouraging transboundary solutions. Building on theories of regional organizations as environmental actors, specific regional organizations active in the Arctic could help to fulfill this role.

[7] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

Unfortunately, as this paper has shown, the largest actor in the Arctic realm, the Russian Federation, has very little interest in such an approach, defining its interests in the region purely in terms of security and economic development. Moreover, the relatively weak supranational institutions of the Eurasian Economic Union make it difficult to constrain or even cajole Russian policymakers into more constructive avenues for environmental progress. However, and even despite the current behavior of Russia in its invasion of Ukraine, that does not mean that there is not a chance for progress. Russia's willingness to engage in multilateralism should not be taken for granted (Pezard et al. 2017), but it does signal the seriousness in which Russia takes the Arctic region, perhaps providing a platform for more constructive engagement—and allowing its regional partners in the Eurasian Economic Union a way to enter into the debates regarding environmental policy in the Arctic.

Indeed, while Russia's willingness to engage multilaterally is very different than the way it behaves within the EaEU, the proliferation of multilateral fora may create an opening for the EaEU to encourage some discrete movement in environmental protection. In reality, this movement will not occur at the national or supranational level, as the grouping remains too weak for that, nor will it have any influence in areas related directly to Russian national security interests. Instead, as in the EU, the real value of the EaEU may be to encourage polycentric approaches to governance in Russia's Arctic north, benefiting from the neglect of Putin on environmental issues and, as an alternative, forging local administrative and civil society linkages. While the space for civil society in Russia has shrunk even more in the run-up to the invasion of Ukraine, building cross-border coalitions for environmental innovation, within the framework of EaEU cooperation, may be tolerated by Russian authorities.

In any event, the Arctic region requires a multitude of innovative approaches to deal with its environmental issues. When speaking of such challenges, even the prying open of a closed actor such as Russia just a tiny bit, using the lever of the EaEU, may be the best that can be done at the moment.

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