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# 'Home-grown' vs. 'imported' regionalism? Overlapping dynamics of regional migration governance in post-Soviet Eurasia

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines intra-regional ('home-grown') and externally-driven ('imported') frameworks of regional migration governance in post-Soviet Eurasia. It argues that whether regional migration governance originates from internal or external sources makes an important difference. It shows that intra-regional migration governance develops around economic rationality, whereas externally-driven regional migration governance tends to prioritise linkages between migration and security and, albeit less systematically, issues of migrants' rights. The article demonstrates how intra-regional migration governance started to emerge as part of regional integration processes, becoming institutionalised within organisations such as the Eurasian Economic Union. It also shows how alternative versions of regional migration governance have been promoted by international organisations via, in particular, Regional Consultative Processes. It concludes with a reflection on competition and complementarity between these partially overlapping regimes of regional migration governance in Eurasia.

## KEYWORDS

Regional migration governance; Eurasia; labour migration; Eurasian Economic Union; Russia; Central Asia; European Union; security; migrant rights

## Introduction

Migration governance within post-Soviet Eurasia is increasingly analysed through institutional frameworks of various regional integration organisations in the post-Soviet space (e.g. Davletgildev 2016; Molodikova 2017). The breakdown of the USSR provoked the 'great migration' of the 1990s (de Tinguy 2004) of largely post-colonial, political – often forced – character. Later on, there have been significant shifts in the nature of migration flows within this broad region. By the end of the first decade of independence, forced and ethnic migration had decreased considerably while economic migration became more prominent (Korobkov 2007; Ryazantsev 2007). Ivakhniouk (2003) has demonstrated that the post-Soviet space (with the exception of the Baltic states) forms the Eurasian migration system with predominantly massive intra-regional migration. Russia, which some scholars see as a 'metropolis' for the former Soviet republics (Molodikova 2017; Kembayev 2014), and more recently also Kazakhstan (Laruelle 2010)

function as its two major migration destinations. This system embodies specific migration realities and governance priorities that play an important role in politically complex and volatile processes of regional migration governance (Lavenex and Piper 2021).

The extant research has shown that post-Soviet states have undertaken numerous attempts to institutionalise regional migration governance (Leonov and Korneev 2019; Vinokurov 2018). These cases of regional migration governance ‘from above’ (Lavenex and Piper 2021) have mostly emerged within Russia-led regional integration organisations. Kazakhstan has also played an active role in their development, in particular, in the case of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (Kembayev 2014). Other studies have shown that migration policies of countries within the Eurasian migration system have experienced significant influence of external actors, mostly international organisations (IOs) both from and beyond the UN system, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the European Union (EU) and others (Gavriliu 2011; Kluczevska 2019; Korneev 2017). However, the role that actors formally external to the Eurasian migration system play in development of *regional* migration governance is mostly absent from such analyses with exception of studies that look at the EU migration policy towards its ‘Eastern Neighbourhood’ (e.g. Makaryan and Chobanyan 2014; Zhyznomirska 2011). In this article, we draw on these two strands of scholarship in order to examine and compare still very much under-researched modalities of regional migration governance initiated both from within and outside of post-Soviet Eurasia. We, thus, hope to contribute to growing literature on regional migration governance (Geddes et al. 2019; Lavenex 2019; Lavenex and Piper 2021) and its relationships with global migration governance (Betts 2011; Geiger and Pécoud 2010).

We advance two key arguments. First, we argue that whether regional migration governance originates from internal or external sources makes an important difference. We adhere to a widely shared view that regions are social and political constructions (Geddes et al. 2019). However, we use the notion of ‘region’ here to refer to the space that used to be a unified polity within internationally recognised boundaries (USSR) and whose full disintegration has been disputed (Molodikova 2017). Within the field of post-Soviet studies, its specific areas are also generally regarded as sub-regions, although their boundaries, internal cohesiveness and dynamics of interaction between states provoke intensive scholarly debates (Russo 2018). We believe these are important caveats. Nonetheless, in our description of this space as a region and its more or less cohesive areas as sub-regions, we also draw on the established understanding of the post-Soviet Eurasia as a regional migration system discussed above. This, however, does not imply that a regional migration *governance* system that we see emerging within the confines of this space neatly corresponds to its boundaries. Instead, as we have already shown elsewhere, one might distinguish several – partially overlapping – regional migration governance sub-systems (Leonov and Korneev 2019). This paper focuses mostly on what is often described as Central Asian sub-regional migration system linked to Russia.

Second, drawing on scholarly discussions of major – paradigmatic – approaches to migration governance (Lavenex 2019; Pécoud 2021) and their relationships with regional governance, we show that in post-Soviet Eurasia intra-regional migration governance frameworks develop around economic rationality, whereas externally-driven initiatives

tend to prioritise linkages between migration and security and, although to a lesser extent, migrants' rights. We illustrate our arguments through an analysis of both 'home-grown' (intra-regional) and 'imported' (externally-driven) regional migration governance initiatives. We do not aim to make strong and final claims about their success. Rather, we are interested in the vectors that they follow and in overlaps that emerge from their simultaneous development. We show how intra-regional migration governance started to emerge thanks to and as part of regional integration processes culminating with the creation of the EAEU. We also show how alternative versions of regional migration governance have been promoted by IOs such as the EU (together with the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)), IOM and UNHCR via, in particular, Regional Consultative Processes (RCPs).

This article builds on a mix of interdisciplinary methodological approaches. It draws significantly on legal analysis of documents produced by national governments, regional and international organisations. The analysis also relies on unstructured interviews and informal communications with staff of IOs and local NGOs, national civil servants, researchers, and (participant) observations conducted by one of the authors during several periods of recurrent fieldwork in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) in 2011–2017.

The article develops as follows. We begin by drawing an important distinction between intra-regional and externally-driven regional migration governance linking this idea with a discussion of three paradigmatic approaches to/ rationales for migration governance and their implications. We continue by briefly characterising 'home-grown' regional integration dynamics relevant for migration governance and then examine in more detail the case of the EAEU. Then, we explore how specific IOs have been developing 'imported' versions of regional migration governance through RCPs. We conclude with a reflection on competition, cooperation and complementarity between these partially overlapping regional regimes, which seem to resemble dynamics in other regions of the world.

## Sources of and rationales for regional migration governance

This article mostly focuses on what Lavenex and Piper (2021) call regional migration governance 'from above'. It primarily explores 'purposeful interaction of states in more or less formalised institutional settings' (Lavenex and Piper 2021, XX). However, we believe that, beyond emphasising the top-down nature of relevant governance inputs, it is crucial to recognise one more important distinction related to sources of regional migration governance. With this, we follow Lavenex and Piper (2021) in their efforts to provide 'a more accurate characterisation of not only the variety of governance forms [...] in different regions but also of its multi-dimensional nature by demonstrating very political nature of 'the governance project' (XX).

We identify two types of regional migration governance based on the type of actors who conceive of and promote them. The first type is intra-regional – 'home-grown' – migration governance that develops as part of regional integration within diverse normative and organisational structures in South America (Acosta and Freier 2018), Africa (Bissong 2021) or the post-Soviet space (e.g. Davletgildev 2016). The second type is externally driven – 'imported' – regional cooperation on migration promoted by IOs

of global (UN agencies, IOM) or extra-regional nature such as the EU in Africa (Dick and Schraven 2019; Spijkerboer 2021), the Middle East (Fakhoury 2021) or the post-Soviet space. External support for development of regional migration governance often materialises in the shape of Regional Consultative Processes (RCPs). These ostensibly informal regional dialogues, which are typically designed, administered and promoted by IOs, now cover most regions of the world (Koehler 2011). Results of RCPs are very mixed (e.g. Kneebone 2014; Moretti 2021) but they seem to suggest that, beyond tangible influence discerned through analysis of emerging normative architectures, RCPs also function as an important mechanism of socialisation (Düvell 2011). RCPs usually have trans-regional origins (Lavenex 2016) and contribute to processes of trans-regional diffusion of migration governance frameworks. Their trans-regional modality denotes ‘sets of formal and informal institutions that cut across and connect different geographical regions, constituting or constraining the behaviour of states and non-state actors in a given policy field’ (Betts 2011, 17). It is also seen as ‘a type of governance that is arguably increasingly important in the context of Northern states’ attempts to regulate irregular flows within and from the South’<sup>1</sup> (Betts 2011, 18). Cooperation on migration between the EU and countries of migrant origin and transit is a prominent example of this trend. Importantly, EU norms are being promoted by other IOs as international norms and this contributes to blurring the boundaries between different types of external actors (Lavenex 2016).

In this paper, we seek to explore differences as well as overlaps that exist between priorities, participants and practices of regional migration governance of these two types. Interactions between such regional frameworks are not necessarily cooperative but may also involve multiple contestations (Lavenex and Piper 2021) that are often due to competing, conflicting or overlapping rationales for regional migration governance. We, thus, concur that patterns of regional migration governance tend to reflect one of the three paradigmatic approaches to migration governance (Lavenex 2019; for an alternative classification see Pécoud 2021). The first of these approaches focuses on the link between migration and security, which is a reflection of securitisation of migration developing in various national and regional contexts in the last three decades (e.g. Bourbeau 2013). Within this approach, migration governance, including inter-state cooperation, builds on security considerations and, eventually, focuses on migration control and prevention. The second approach, which can be seen in direct opposition, draws on the logic of human rights and postulates that migration governance should primarily aim at protecting migrants’ rights and creating opportunities for unrestricted migration often invoking ethical arguments (E.g. Carens 2013; Piper 2015). The third approach follows the logic of economic rationality and, as seen by critical migration scholars, provides major justification for ‘migration management’ agenda (Kalm 2010). It treats migration as a productivity factor crucial for economic growth and an important corrector to natural demographic developments within national socio-economic contexts (Balch 2010; de Haas 2010). This approach mostly stimulates more open migration policies in regards to labour migration and mobility (but see Ruhs 2013 for a provocative and highly controversial discussion of potential trade-offs emerging from combination of this approach with the previous one focusing on migrants’ rights). Lavenex and Piper (2021, XX) have further conceptualised these approaches as oscillating between ‘protective (migrant rights enhancing) and protectionist (access-reducing) policies

which have developed at different levels of governance and are promoted by different types of actors’.

The extant research has already demonstrated that intra-regional migration governance emerging within broader regional economic integration projects prioritises intra-regional freedom of movement (Acosta and Freier 2018) thus stimulating intra-regional mobility (Geddes et al. 2019; Lavenex and Piper 2019). Externally promoted regional migration governance is often wrapped in security considerations and focuses on related priorities for regional action on immigration/border control or fight against irregular migration (Betts 2011; Lixi 2019). Building on this and related literature in the fields of global and regional migration governance, we aim to show important links between these two different types of regional migration governance and the underlying rationales for related governance efforts in post-Soviet Eurasia.

Firstly, with increasing dynamics of economic regionalism and more issue-specific regionalisation in post-Soviet Eurasia (Hancock and Libman 2016), intra-regional migration governance initiatives tend to build on economic rationality. Considerations of security and human rights might also be taken into account but they are treated in a narrower and rather adjacent way. Secondly, actors may relate differently to the three approaches. While for actors external to Central Asia, priorities might focus on rights of forced migrants that are already present or may eventually get trapped in this region due to its proximity to Afghanistan, the governments of Central Asian countries would rather prioritise opportunities for (potential) labour migrants and intra-regional mobility of their citizens – hence the support for a visa free regime – and larger development agenda. We, thus, argue that in post-Soviet Eurasia such priorities tend to depend on sources of regional migration governance which have often generated initiatives in parallel to each other.

Importantly, the degree to which a particular agenda is ‘genuinely’ home-grown could constitute a separate research question. We are not disregarding possibilities of global diffusion or other ways of trans-regional policy learning (Betts 2011; Börzel and Risse 2012). We equally acknowledge subtler discursive and practical influences that are enshrined in ‘regimes of mobility’ (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013) and ‘international migration narratives’ (Pécoud 2015) that might have profound, although not always identifiable, impact on preferences of actors within a particular region. Our point of departure in this article is precisely the need to focus on agency of such actors within regions and explore how their interactions with each other and with external actors affect development of regional migration governance. More specifically, we are interested in what states within one such region – post-Soviet Eurasia – define as their regional migration governance priorities.

### **‘Home-grown’ regionalism: intra-regional migration governance**

Dynamics of regional migration governance in the post-Soviet space have been largely determined by Russian priorities thus confirming the view that regional hegemons often function as important drivers of regional migration cooperation (Lavenex 2016). There exist different ways to conceptualise more or less identifiable periods in the development of Russian migration policy (Molodikova 2017; Ryazantsev 2007). Perhaps the most accurate analysis is provided by Ivakhnyuk (2016). She identifies ‘human rights’

considerations and related ‘open door’ policies in the 1990s, preoccupation with ‘national security’ and the fight against irregular migration in 2002–2007 and the focus on ‘economic pragmatism’ stimulating migration for Russia’s economic needs in 2007–2011. This analysis – echoing paradigmatic approaches to migration governance – shows that in little more than 20 years since the break-up of the USSR, Russian migration policy has gone through a series of fluctuations from liberal to illiberal and to, once again, more open approaches. These paradigmatic shifts have also influenced Russia’s views on the development of regional migration governance mechanisms. In the first two periods, attempts to develop such mechanisms have mostly been unsuccessful and have come to fruition only when the agenda of ‘economic pragmatism’ has come to dominate Russia’s policies in this field (Leonov and Korneev 2019). This is particularly evident in the case of the EAEU.

The Treaty on the EAEU signed in Astana by the Presidents of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia on 29 May 2014 brought the Eurasian economic project to fundamentally new format and level of integration. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined the EAEU in 2015, Uzbekistan (an observer state) – with its population of roughly 30 million – is currently considering membership, which would significantly change dynamics of labour migration within the Union.

The EAEU is a regional economic organisation with an international legal personality and bears elements of weak supranationalisation (Karliuk 2017), which reflects a higher level of integration unprecedented for the post-Soviet space (Vinokurov 2018). The EAEU has a complex institutional structure and some scholars argue that it is modelled on the institutions of the European Union (EU) (Karliuk 2017; Schenk 2015). The EAEU Treaty regulates only labour migration. The Treaty creates different labour migration regimes for citizens of EAEU Member States and citizens of other countries without interfering with issues of visa-free regime between member-states or combating irregular migration and human trafficking, readmission, regulating forced migration, international protection and asylum. The EAEU Treaty regulates relations between states *within* the Union, without affecting their relations with third countries.

Importantly, the EAEU Treaty does not use the term ‘migrant worker’ but ‘worker of a member state’. This new terminology emphasises the peculiarity of the regional model of free movement of labour, similar to the free movement of workers within the European Communities (Article 96). However, despite the claim that the EAEU is modelled on the European Union (Schenk 2015), there is a significant difference between the two with regards to labour migration dynamics and their regulation. In the case of the EU, freedom of movement (introduced already in the first treaties in the 1950s) aimed at stimulating labour migration between member states for the benefit of economic integration by creating a new migration reality as part of the integration process. In the case of the EAEU, Treaty provisions reflect the reality on the ground – they recognise the fact that labour migration between these countries is already very significant and create rules that facilitate these existing migration patterns.

A number of legal innovations already testify to the considerable liberalisation of labour migration governance within the EAEU, which makes it a particularly advanced subsystem of migration governance within the Eurasian migration system (Leonov and Korneev 2019). An important achievement of the EAEU Treaty is the establishment of common taxation schemes for citizens of all EAEU member states, who are subject of



national treatment. This differs from the taxation regime for migrant workers from other CIS countries and is an important step towards the creation of a genuine single labour market.

The Treaty also introduces provisions guaranteeing a number of social rights of EAEU workers and members of their families, such as access to healthcare and children's education, on the same conditions and in the same manner as for citizens of the state of employment (Article 98). In this way, the EAEU abolishes major organisational boundaries for migration (Geddes et al. 2019) existing within host countries: such guarantees function as an important driver of migration, they can partially solve the problem of irregular labour migration in the region, and also contribute to better integration of migrants. The provisions of Article 98 of the EAEU Treaty are formulated in accordance with the highest international standards for protection of migrant workers' rights and fully comply with the provisions of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families of 18 December 1990 (Articles 15, 25, 26, 27, p. 28, 30, 32, 33, 1, 34). This is especially important since neither Russia nor Kazakhstan (as the major migrant receiving countries in the Eurasian migration system) have joined this Convention. This shows that states are more comfortable with assuming obligations to guarantee certain migrant workers' rights within the framework of limited regional cooperation rather than adhering to such standards at the universal level. More generally, this shows the advantages of regional migration governance in relation to such sensitive issues as migration and welfare.

Despite the fairly advanced provisions of the EAEU Treaty on labour migration, its implementation has been experiencing a number of difficulties, as a result of which workers of EAEU member states and their families may encounter problems of both legal and social nature (Zhaksylykov 2018). This was, for instance, the case with the establishment of equal conditions for retirement benefits in all Member States. The development of a special agreement in this field was a direct outcome of the provisions of the EAEU Treaty (Article 98 (3)) that foresaw its adoption. However, this Agreement was signed by EAEU Member States only in December 2019 and entered into force only in January 2021.

The EAEU Treaty also faces other implementation issues. A serious problem discussed by some scholars (Schenk 2015; Poletayev 2019) relates to the provisions of the administrative and migration legislation of the Russian Federation prohibiting re-entry into its territory for a foreign citizen who had violated the migration regime or committed two or more administrative offenses. Indeed, Russian legislation (FZ-114 1996; FZ-195 2001; FZ-115 2002) establishes administrative liability in the form of a ban on entry for a period of three to five years (and up to 10 years in some cases of serious breach of migration legislation) for a foreign worker (migrant) if s/he commits two or more administrative violations during one year or three years (depending on the type of violation). Such a ban also denies a migrant in question access to the labour market in Russia and inevitably affects the implementation of the EAEU Treaty with regard to labour migration governance. This is certainly an excess of legislative regulation regarding the prohibition of entry for 'ordinary' (not related to the migration regime) administrative violations. Moreover, the governments of the EAEU Member States are still forced to solve the problem of the so-called 'black lists' at the bilateral level.

These difficulties associated with the content and implementation of the EAEU Treaty reflect the initial stage of regional integration. The results achieved, expressed in the



creation of a simplified mechanism for the movement of workers inside the EAEU, the procedures associated with their registration, stay, employment, guarantees of basic social rights for workers and members of their families, and the national taxation regime confirm the relative success of regional integration in this field. Current initiatives aimed at the implementation of the Treaty provisions and improvement of the status of workers from EAEU Member States within the common labour market demonstrate that the level and pace of integration in the field of migration governance are comparable to the similar processes within the EU or, more precisely, its predecessor – the European Economic Community (Leonov and Lisinskaya [forthcoming](#)).

### **‘Imported’ regionalism: externally-driven migration governance**

Multiple external actors, most prominently various IOs, have been attempting to steer migration governance in the post-Soviet space. They have promoted – with various degrees of success – the three approaches to migration governance described above at both national and regional levels. The EU, which is the single most important trans-regional migration governance actor in post-Soviet Eurasia, as well as IOM and UNHCR – referent IOs in the field of global migration governance (Korneev 2017) – have brought in their own region-focused initiatives operating through RCPs. Recognising particular relevance and importance of RCPs, we explore several such processes in Central Asia focusing on contributions of these IOs to development of regional migration governance frameworks.

### ***Trans-regional modality: role of the EU***

Starting from 2000s, in the context of the global anti-terrorist campaign, the EU has intensified its attempts of migration policy transfer to Central Asian countries, fearing their migration potential associated with unstable economic situation, internal conflicts, drug and human trafficking, radicalisation and terrorism (Gavriliš 2011). This growth of attention and related action coincided with migration rapidly becoming a priority in EU external policies towards its ‘near abroad’ (Zhyznomirskaya 2011). The geopolitical position of Central Asia and its arguably growing importance for stability of the EU internal security regime has contributed to the EU’s active promotion of ‘good’ migration governance in the region.<sup>2</sup> In ‘The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership’, migration, together with smuggling, human trafficking and border control, is named among ‘challenges facing the globalised world’ that ‘affect Europe and Central Asia alike, and warrant a common response’ (Council of the European Union 2007, 3). The EU, just like many other IOs, has been continuously trying to approach Central Asian countries as a region and – through its regional Strategy – has endeavoured to contribute to region-building. In many ways, this emulated the approach used in the development of the EU migration policy towards Eastern Europe, reflecting the rationale of ‘inventing’ the neighbourhood discursively linked to danger and insecurity (Zhyznomirskaya 2011, 517).

In a similar vein, the European Union strived to increase the ‘region-ness’ of Central Asia despite many factors that undermine region-building efforts of both local and external actors. Following the Strategy’s guidelines, the Commission defined migration

management, together with border management and fight against organised crime, as a key priority within the Central Asia Indicative Programme for 2007–2010 (European Commission 2007a). The Council also explicitly linked migration management to the promotion of intra-regional cooperation (Council of the European Union 2007, 3, 6). The Commission emphasised related ideas associated with the concept of ‘migratory routes’ in its programmatic document ‘Applying the Global Approach to Migration to the Eastern and South-Eastern Regions Neighbouring the European Union’ (European Commission 2007b, 3) and, eventually, in ‘The Global Approach to Migration and Mobility’, where it pointed to the pressing need to address overlap between the Budapest and Prague Regional Consultative Processes while expanding them further into the post-Soviet space and the ‘silk routes’ region (European Commission 2011, 8).

The Budapest Process and the Prague Process are the two RCPs coordinated by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and sponsored by the EU. The Budapest Process is also the oldest ongoing RCP in the post-Soviet region. It has significantly evolved over time, in particular, in its geographic focus. Since its inception in 1993, it has targeted cooperation with the Central European countries, as well as with the countries of South-East Europe. As the Central European countries have joined the EU, the Budapest Process has moved further to the East to include the post-Soviet countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) into its cooperative framework, in line with the EU agenda. Since 2003, ICMPD has been implementing the project on the Re-direction of the Budapest Process to the CIS (ICMPD 2005) that eventually included Central Asian states in the so-called ‘Silk Routes Region’.

Such a move was needed to involve Central Asian states in a wider regional platform focusing on migration governance. However, since the inception of the Budapest Process, Central Asian states were not so eager to participate in its meetings on a regular basis with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan being, however, more responsive than the others (Interview 2; Interview 3). This is indicative of both the long-term lack of genuine intra-regional cooperation among Central Asian states and their rather low level of engagement with international initiatives, in particular, in the cases of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The reasons for limited engagement with IOs on matters of international migration are, however, different for these two countries. Whereas Uzbekistan has long insisted on the fact that migration was not among its policy priorities and generally preferred avoiding international interventions in this policy field (Interview 1; Interview 11), Kazakhstan has positioned itself as a developed country, a pole of attraction for migrants and, thus, was unwilling to participate in RCP meetings on the same side as migrant-sending Afghanistan or Tajikistan (Interview 2).

Another relevant RCP also coordinated by the ICMPD – the Prague Process – started in 2009 as a project funded by the EU and the Government of the Czech Republic under the title ‘Building Migration Partnerships’ in the framework of EU cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries and was initially designed only for two years. However, after the project was over in 2011, several EU Member States and the European Commission initiated a follow-up for the period from 2012 to 2016. The relative popularity of the Prague Process among participating states, including those ones from Central Asia that were previously reluctant to become part of trans-regional migration governance dialogues (such as Uzbekistan), is, at least partly, related to the ideology of this project. The

Prague Process emphasises that all participating countries are equal contributors to the creation of migration partnerships, which partly does away – at least discursively – with the problematic ‘peer pressure’ on the countries of origin and transit and makes them more eager participants of this RCP.

Gradually, the Budapest Process has become too broad and too vague, without any specific focus on migration governance issues that are important for Central Asia and, thus, with a very limited added value. The same, at least partly, is valid for the Prague Process that is more focused on priorities of the EU and is hardly interested in perspectives coming from local actors on the ground (Interview 9). After its second phase, the Prague Process has been renewed again and continues to be part of trans-regional migration governance dynamics in Central Asia and wider post-Soviet Eurasia. It has even attempted to engage with the intra-regional migration governance processes through, in particular, proposing its expertise for monitoring of labour migration governance within the EAEU (see, for instance, an ICMPD report produced by Poletayev (2019)). Nevertheless, it is, perhaps, accurate to say that one of the most important factors adversely affecting the Budapest and Prague Processes could be called ‘the threshold of association effect’ when perception of ICMPD as an EU-driven actor becomes harmful for its image of an independent technocratic knowledge-based agency and contributes to complications in its relations with the states involved in the RCPs. It is also clear that there has been a certain demand for a ‘genuinely regional’ migration dialogue – an RCP that would be at least partly developed and led by Central Asian countries themselves, albeit under guidance and help from external actors.

### *Global modality: the Almaty process*

It is against this background that the Almaty Process (AP) – a new RCP in the Eurasian Migration System – was initiated by IOM and UNCHR. However, remembering that the EU has vested these two IOs with powers to promote its ‘global approach to migration’ around the world, including through RCPs (Lavenex 2016), one should not be surprised by involvement on the part of the EU as well. This is confirmed by the funding for the AP that, at least during its initial stage, partly came from the EU (Orchard 2016). The AP de-facto emerged in 2011 thanks to the Regional Conference on Refugee Protection and International Migration in Central Asia that adopted the Almaty Declaration supported by four Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) and fully formalised in 2013. The tandem of IOM and UNHCR sustains the functions of its secretariat. IOM plays the leading role in organising various activities of the AP, in particular through hiring staff for Process-related purposes and liaising with civil servants of the participating states on regular basis (fieldwork observations in Bishkek, October 2016, March 2017 and May 2018; Interview 6; Interview 12).

The AP involves four out of five post-Soviet Central Asian countries, and three neighbouring states (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Turkey), whereas Pakistan and Iran have observer status. Importantly, neither Russia (the major destination country in the Eurasian migration system), nor Uzbekistan (the major migrant origin country in the region) participate. Participating states defined several key issues of common interest, including compliance with international law and standards for migrants with protection needs, national

security and border protection, cross-border migration-related crime, especially human trafficking and smuggling, statelessness, emergency preparedness, and irregular migration from Central Asia. The initial scope of the AP (as well as of other RCPs) was far from the labour migration agenda of intra-regional initiatives. The core thematic rationale of the AP was fixed around ‘mixed migration flows’ – ambitious but also ambiguous concept emerged from the workings of several IOs, including IOM and UNHCR (Moretti 2018). One of the first substantial documents produced by the AP is the Regional Action Plan drawing on UNHCR’s 10-Point Plan of Action on Refugee Protection and Mixed Migration. Objectives of this Action Plan together with the geographical focus of the AP made it clear that priorities of the IOs steering the direction and the content of the Process were mostly focusing on building capacities of Central Asian countries and changing their normative approaches to migration governance with the view to turn them into an important regional protection area for potential forced migrants from beyond Central Asian borders, most importantly from Afghanistan. One of the major ideas within the AP is to enhance regional protection capacities (Orchard 2016). This certainly reflects the priorities of UNHCR and, increasingly so, of IOM but also corresponds to the expectations of major donors such as the EU and the USA (Gavriliš 2011). Similar to other RCPs, the AP has contributed to securitisation of migration, in particular, through emphasising linkages between migration and security in national migration policy documents of the participating states. A special ‘mapping’ report on irregular migration in Central Asia, produced by IOM (2015) and presented to participating states of the AP, various IOs and embassies in a regional roundtable in Astana, is indicative of this trend.

Initially, the IOs behind the AP were reluctant to build links with regional organisations in the post-Soviet space, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or the EAEU. Cooperation with the first two organisations would fit first priorities identified by the AP participants in 2013. Cooperation with the EAEU could be a way to comprehensively address other issues that have eventually emerged on the AP’s agenda. In particular, the 2nd AP Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) ‘Labour Migration Opportunities and Challenges in Central Asia: Addressing solutions for migrants and refugees’ (22 September 2015, Astana, Kazakhstan) addressed issues of labour migration. Two countries participating in the AP (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) are also Member States of the EAEU, while Tajikistan is a potential member. However, the programme of this meeting did not even hint at the existence of the EAEU. Meanwhile, discussions of the problems caused by re-entry bans applied by Russia often see the application of this ban in relation to workers from other EAEU Member States as a violation of their rights provided by the EAEU Treaty (IOM 2017). This issue provokes serious concerns on the part of the governments of migrant origin countries participating in the AP. Not being resolved within the framework of the EAEU, this issue has eventually appeared on the agenda of the AP.

This strategic diversification of the AP that implied entering the terrain of regional labour migration governance, became visible during the third AP Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) ‘Addressing Mixed Migration Flows in Central Asia: Human mobility, Rights of Vulnerable Migrants and Refugees and Regional Cooperation’ that took place on 19–20 September 2016 in Astana. This meeting addressed issues of labour migration and worker rights (Almaty Process 2016).

This hints at a spill-over of certain migration governance issues from the setting of regional integration (EAEU) to an externally-inspired interstate consultative dialogue, which in this case fulfils a complementary function and, potentially, could be contributing to the development of 'home-grown' regionalism rather than competing with it. Nevertheless, while the Concept Note of the third SOM paid special attention to the place of migration in the relations between Central Asian countries and Russia, the AP still does not seem to be genuinely aiming to involve Russia in its activities, without even mentioning its potential membership. Overall, since regional labour migration governance is central to the EAEU, such parallel dynamics put the AP and the EAEU in the situation of simultaneous complementarity and competition. They are complementary as per issues and approaches at stake but involve competition between actors. On the one hand, regional integration processes have not taken into account results – although mixed and contested – of external migration governance efforts undertaken by IOs at both national and regional levels. On the other hand, until very recently, external actors have mostly disregarded both failures and achievements of intra-regional migration governance.

The AP could perhaps be seen as something less 'external' than the Budapest and the Prague Processes, which essentially extended the EU pre-enlargement vision of regional migration governance in its immediate neighbourhood to a 'wider neighbourhood'. The AP is focused on the space within the confines of post-Soviet Central Asia and some adjacent territories. It is, however, still an 'imported' framework of regional migration governance because it has not grown out of efforts by the governments of countries in the region but has been proposed to them by IOM and UNHCR. In other words, it has been initiated, designed and coordinated by actors external to post-Soviet Eurasia. These IOs have come to Central Asia with their ideas of 'the region' and of regional migration governance, with pre-formulated priorities that are more relevant for potential destination countries than for predominantly origin and transit countries in this part of the world.

Even if it is possible to assert some degree of 'ownership' (albeit a contested concept itself, see Cornwall and Brock 2005) by Central Asian states involved, there are clear indicators that the AP is rather closed for other types of local actors, most notably – NGOs focusing on migration and human rights. Orchard (2016) notes a limited number of civil society actors participating in the AP. From the start, they have been underrepresented in the Process, and even those that have obtained formally defined status have had difficulties with actually accessing meetings at various levels (Interview 4; Interview 8). Moreover, invited organisations are often not representative of the multiple civil society stakeholders in the field of migration, including the most respected ones such as the Human Rights Centre from Tajikistan (Interview 4; Interview 5; Interview 10).

If at the start of the AP, civil society actors were at least formally invited to attend its meetings, in 2015 and, especially, in 2017 their number significantly decreased (Interview 12). Some of them have been vocal about this lack of transparency on the part of IOM and critical about the *modus operandi* that this and some other IOs have been trying to impose in the post-Soviet space (Interview 4; Interview 8; Interview 9). In the words of one expert: 'We could speak about a certain reorientation [of IOs] to be more responsive to the needs of the government than to the needs of society and

migrants, to the public need in the field of regulating migration processes'. (Interview 9). Importantly, the very same expert has quoted an interview with a local NGO activist conducted in 2014. This activist proved to be very self-critical and explained: 'Not only were we disappointed in IOs that they stopped actively cooperating with us, supporting some systemic projects, but they were also disappointed in us and rightly so because our civil society is in a weak embryonic stage. IOs have lost interest in us as a civilised enclave and are simply on duty here, without much enthusiasm'. (Interview 9). This does not mean that IOs are not engaging with local civil society actors. NGOs function as key beneficiaries, implementing partners and sub-contractors of various IOs' projects (Kluczevska 2019). However, the workings of the RCPs in Central Asia demonstrate that IOs act as top-down promoters of regional cooperation working mostly through the governments in the target countries (Lavenex and Piper 2021) and other IOs, while restricting access for diverse civil society actors, which is similar to the situation in other regions (see, Kneebone 2014).

Nevertheless, it would have been a mistake to argue that local NGOs either reject or accept all norms and practices promoted by IOs – under various guises – in totality. Rather, local civil society actors value and creatively transform some of externally promoted ideas but remain more sceptical about others, which is typical for processes of localisation (Bonacker, von Heusinger, and Zimmer 2017). However, contestations of both procedural aspects and substance of policy diffusion efforts can become particularly problematic for activities of specific IOs and their donors when they start pulling them in different directions. On the one hand, diffusion of internationally accepted standards and practices in regards to protection of forced migrants has been welcomed by human rights activists (Interview 4; Interview 8; Interview 12). On the other hand, even some migration experts and activists have expressed concerns that this might be a serious burden for their countries, which would need to welcome those who would flee Afghanistan, Pakistan or China (Interview 4; Interview 5). Even if it is not directly linked to the EU as in the case of two other RCPs, the development of regional protection areas is contested on the ground because it is seen as a priority of major receiving countries in the 'Global North'.

Moreover, Central Asian states are not ready to focus only on protection-related priorities of the RCPs, including the AP (Interview 5; Interview 7). This is because, as recognised by the ICMPD (2016), Central Asian governments are keen on implementing the 'migration for development' and migration management agenda (Geiger and Pécoud 2010) popular – thanks to IOM and the World Bank – among the governments of migrant origin countries and many professionalised NGOs that work with IOs and depend on them (Kluczevska 2019; Korneev 2017). However, eventual attempts to broaden the focus of the RCPs under the ideology of pragmatic migration management with its focus on countering irregular migration face contestations on the part of other NGOs who prioritise the human rights approach to migration governance. As explained by a local human rights activist: 'They push for this Philippines' model. But this is not for us. We have tried to argue about this but who cares, they still push for it, the government is fond of it' (Interview 4). The AP has not managed to become a genuinely inclusive and 'locally owned' process neither in its content nor in its relations with the wide spectrum of local actors in Central Asia that could have had an important impact on its agenda and outputs – promoting a rights-based



approach to migration governance (Piper and Rother 2012; Piper 2015) – had they been given a voice.

## Conclusion

This article has examined intra-regional ('home-grown') and externally-driven ('imported') frameworks of regional migration governance in post-Soviet Eurasia. It has shown that 'home-grown' regionalism in the field of migration governance and, in particular, its most recent iteration in the shape of the EAEU has been based on economic rationality and tends to address issues of labour migration to provide workers with indiscriminate access to labour markets of all member states and create conditions for comprehensive free movement within the region. Such intra-regional cooperation has mostly neglected other migratory phenomena, developing only embryonic common instruments against irregular migration and largely disregarding issues of forced migration and related international protection needs. It is, thus, not surprising that these migratory phenomena have become a particular focus of attention for external actors, which have been engaging with post-Soviet countries since their independence.

Drawing on research that has focused on expanding involvement of various IOs in both politics and policies of migration across the Eurasian migration system, this article has shown how the EU, ICMPD, IOM and UNHCR have been contributing to regional migration governance. Many such external interventions within the post-Soviet space have been orchestrated through RCPs or externally-funded region-wide programmes. They have been particularly numerous and visible in Central Asia. The EU has been behind almost all of them as a role model, as a donor or both, contributing to pronounced dynamics of trans-regional policy diffusion from the European to the Eurasian migration governance system. We have analysed several RCPs and focused more closely on the AP coordinated by the IOM and the UNHCR but formally positioned as region-owned. We have shown that such externally induced regional cooperation has mostly focused on issues of forced migration – de-facto limited to facilitating emergence of regional protection zones for eventual containment of undesirable flows within the region – and fight against irregular migration. We have argued that such security-oriented approach is in sharp contrast with intra-region migration governance initiatives that mostly follow the logics of economic rationality and pragmatism.

We have identified both competition and cooperation dynamics between regional integration processes and externally driven inter-state regional cooperation, which speak to the findings about similar trends in other world regions identified, in particular, by several contributions to this special issue. One of RCPs' declared goals is to promote regional approaches to migration governance. Activities of IOs have also contributed to a partial erosion of the Eurasian migration system: they have been more conducive to the emergence of several sub-regional migration governance systems. However, more recently, there also emerges some complementarity of these two tracks of regional cooperation in the region. We show that a steeping pace of regional integration processes culminated in the EAEU has produced important stimuli for external actors which have come up with new initiatives and reinvigorated some existing ones. This is illustrated by the developments within the AP that has acquired new dimensions after the entry into force of the EAEU Treaty.



## Notes

1. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for problematising our use of this term. Indeed, both “Global North” and “Global South” are social constructs and their meanings, as well as their uses have varied. We are fully aware of the nature of such (implied) dichotomies and acknowledge the importance of related debates in migration governance literature (see, for instance, Natter 2018). We do, however, invoke this term (albeit in quotation marks) because our informants in Central Asia (experts in the field of migration) use it and it is an important marker for us. It is also used in global migration governance literature in order to emphasise the inherent inequalities in distribution of opportunities and power in relation to migration processes and governance (Adepoju, van Noorloos, and Zoomers 2010; Betts 2011).
2. More recently, Central Asia has become even more important for the EU and other international actors since nationals of Central Asian states (in other words, migrants from Central Asia) have started to be seen as linked to terrorist activities in Syria.

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- Interview 5: an independent migration expert, Dushanbe, June 2014.
- Interview 6: an employee of an IO, Almaty, August 2014.
- Interview 7: a former state civil servant, Bishkek, October 2014.
- Interview 8: an employee of a local NGO, Bishkek, October 2014.
- Interview 9: an independent migration expert, Almaty, July 2015.
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