

Eurasian integration must be based on clear values and principles rather than simply Russian influence

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Recent events in Ukraine have triggered an interest in the Eurasian Union and Russia's role in the region.

Catherine Lefèvre writes that although Eurasian integration may be inspired to some extent by the European Union, it lacks the shared principles and values which have underpinned some of the EU's successes. She argues that if Eurasian integration is simply driven by Russian influence, rather than voluntarily negotiated principles, then it will ultimately be unsustainable.



In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in nostalgia for the USSR in some post-Soviet countries, as they have moved away from a system of collective security to individual insecurity. This nostalgia can be mostly attributed to the fact that, as part of the USSR, states were responsible for the provision of social protection and jobs to its citizens. Nowadays, such security is not guaranteed, as **Ulugbek Badalov**, a doctor in political anthropology states: "people having known Soviet times, apart from their age, show a high degree of uncertainty about their existence, which leads them to consider life only from day to day".

Many argue that life was better in the USSR. Russian president **Vladimir Putin** once referred to the breakup of the USSR as the 'greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th Century' and it would seem that many Russians would agree that the breakup was a bad thing. A **recent poll** in Russia suggested that as much as 60 per cent of its population feels nostalgic for the communist era. Forty-one year old writer and Muscovite Zhanna Sribnaya, is one of these people. In her opinion all Russians feel some sort of nostalgia for the USSR: "It's trendy because people my age, they can buy what they see, and they want to see their happy childhoods. We remember when ice cream cost seven kopeks and when everyone could go to the Black Sea for summer vacations. Now, only people with money can take those vacations."

Generally speaking, older generations are those who suffer the most from this uncertainty, having grown up in a society in which life was more predictable. So it is perhaps unsurprising that, according to the **Yuriy Levada Analytical Centre**, the nostalgia in Russia for the Soviet Union is mainly evident amongst older generations: "Regret for the break-up of the Soviet Union is mostly shared by pensioners (85 per cent), women of all ages (63 per cent), 40-55 year-olds (67 per cent) and older respondents (83 per cent), those with less than average education (68 per cent), lower income (79 per cent), and rural residents (66 per cent)".

Outside of Russia, the nostalgic feelings are less widespread. In Lithuania, a **Soviet theme park** was created so that younger generations could experience what life was like in the USSR. There is a bunker attraction where tourists can 'enjoy' being humiliated, questioned, and forced to confess crimes which were never committed, as well as exhibitions showing communist propaganda and an experience of being taught how to survive a nuclear attack. As a final treat there is



Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, Credit: Greek Prime Minister's Office (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

the 'Grutas Park' where tourists can appreciate statues and objects, such as toys and portraits from the communist era.

Overall, the level of communist nostalgia differs across the former Soviet republics. According to the [Eurasia Monitor](#), Russia and countries surrounding the Caspian Sea such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan tend to be more pro-Soviet than the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This became evident when the latter three joined the [European Union](#) in 2004. After independence these countries focused on [transforming](#) their economies so that they could participate in the free market. In terms of wealth, Estonia is the most prosperous country of the former Soviet bloc, but Lithuania and Latvia have also experienced economic growth since joining the EU.

But not all post-soviet countries enjoyed a successful transition. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, [Kazakhstan](#) initially suffered from the negative impact of reforming their economy. It was only in 2010 that the country began to experience higher economic growth, helping to reduce the inequality in the country. [Turkmenistan](#) also suffered in the initial phases of independence; the country spent several years in isolation and even today most of its population lives in poverty.

[Belarus](#) on the other hand presents an interesting case. Even after the break up of the Soviet Union, it continued to maintain close economic and political relations with Russia in contrast to other former Soviet countries. Belarus' economy suffered a dip during the transition period after the dissolution but, due to its good relationship with Russia, it recovered fairly quickly.

In 2011 Kazakhstan, along with Russia and Belarus, signed an [agreement](#) that would lead to the creation of a Eurasian Union (EAEU), an idea based on the European Union, by 2015. According to [Putin](#), the EAEU would be based on the 'best values of the Soviet Union' and the model of the EU, but that it is not 'an attempt to capitalise on the nostalgic mood among the older generations'. However, many commentators see this initiative as a way for Putin to take advantage of this nostalgia and for Russia to re-establish its geopolitical influence in Eastern Europe in an attempt to become a '[regional hegemon](#)' once more.

Will the EAEU ever achieve the same status and sphere of influence as the EU?

The chances for the EAEU to one day become as influential as the EU are highly unlikely, given the EU follows a [certain set of principles](#) such as democracy, equality, freedom, rule of law, human dignity and respect for human rights. These values are important; if a European country wishes to join the Union it will have to respect these principles to become eligible for applying.

The importance of principles such as democracy and equality for the EU is to guarantee that no member country will try to dominate or control the Union. One of the primary reasons why the EU is so successful is that all of its members are respected and treated equally.

Despite Putin's [assertions](#) that it will be based on the EU model, it would appear that the EAEU is not based on similar principles. Some former Soviet countries such as Armenia and Ukraine have previously stated that Russia has been [pressuring](#) them to join the EAEU instead of the EU. By contrast, participation in the EU is on a voluntary basis without any external coercion or pressure, and the acceptance of a new member is voted upon by all member states; if one does not agree, a country's entrance can be denied.

President Putin also [claims](#) that the EAEU will follow the principle of equality, but up until now Russia has clearly been [leading](#) the union. In the EU, even when one country is economically stronger than the others, such as Germany, it still does not have more power than other countries. The founding members of the EAEU also do not meet the EU's principles, often having [dictatorial inclinations](#), poor press freedom and high levels of corruption.

If Russia does indeed seek to achieve the same status and sphere of influence as the EU, it will have to change its approach toward other countries. The pressure it has put on countries such as Ukraine and Armenia to join will not

last forever and if one day those countries are able to become independent of Russia's influence, as we have seen in Ukraine, they could ultimately decide to leave the union they were forced into.

A union should be something countries want to be a part of. It should be mutually beneficial and equal. To quote Georgian President [Mikhail Saakashvili](#): "Armenia has been cornered... Moldova is being blockaded, Ukraine is under attack, Azerbaijan faces extraordinary pressure, and Georgia is occupied. Why? Because an old empire is trying to reclaim its bygone borders". To my mind at least, this does not sound like a good recipe for a happy and prosperous union.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Catherine Lefèvre

Catherine Lefèvre has a master in Public Policy from the Willy Brandt School of Public Policy in Erfurt, Germany. She specialised in International Relations & Public and Non-profit Management. She is also interested in world politics and policy making and is co-founder of the [Global Public Policy Watch](#) blog.



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