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Ideas, Institutions, and Regionalism: Kazakhstan's Shifting Narrative

within the Eurasian Economic Union?

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IDEAS, INSTITUTIONS, AND REGIONALISM: KAZAKHSTAN'S SHIFTING  
NARRATIVE WITHIN THE EURASIAN ECONOMIC UNION?

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## Abstract

This thesis examines how Kazakhstan's presidential discourse has constructed, justified, and adapted its relationship with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) across a baseline period of 2019-2021, and in response to two major shocks - the January 2022 protests and the February 2022 Russia-Ukraine war. To investigate this, the study employs Discursive Institutionalism (DI), as developed by Vivien A. Schmidt, and analyses a corpus of official speeches, presidential addresses, EAEU summit statements, and high-level policy documents, supplemented by triangulated evidence from administrative responses and limited elite interviews. The central argument is that Kazakhstan's presidential discourse has not undergone an abrupt policy reversal but rather a emerging pattern of discursive shift: a gradual but analytically observable reframing of EAEU membership away from integrationist and neo-Eurasianist language toward pragmatic-sovereign discourse, emphasising economic functionalism, institutional equality, and Kazakhstan's role as an autonomous connectivity hub. Drawing on Discursive Institutionalism, where discourse is understood as both the representation of ideas and the interactive process through which political actors communicate and legitimize them, the study focuses specifically on communicative discourse that is, the public-facing articulation of policy ideas by political leaders directed toward broader audiences. In this sense, presidential discourse is treated not as a derivative reflection of internal policy coordination, but as an independent site of agency through which institutional constraints are actively reframed and presented as sovereign political choices. The thesis contributes to the application of Discursive Institutionalism in Central Asia and demonstrates the analytical value of combining presidential communicative discourse with administrative communication data.

Keywords: Discursive Institutionalism, Kazakhstan, EAEU, elite discourse, discourse analysis, adaptive framing, geopolitical crisis, multi-vectorism, sovereignty.

## Introduction

In June 2022, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev addressed the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum in the presence of Russian President Vladimir Putin and, before a global audience, declared that Kazakhstan would not recognise the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics as sovereign entities (Tokayev, 2022). The statement was striking not only for its content but for its context: a Kazakhstani head of state publicly distancing his country from Russian foreign policy on Russian soil, in a forum dedicated to economic partnership. Yet within weeks, Alikhan Smailov, Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, was also visiting the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council, reaffirming Kazakhstan's commitment to the EAEU and signing a new program on joint actions in the field of consumer rights protection (Tokayev, 2022). Both performances were official, elite-level, and deliberate. Together, they exemplify the core puzzle animating this thesis: how does Kazakhstan maintain formal membership in a Russian-led integration project while simultaneously constructing an increasingly autonomous discursive identity?

This puzzle is not primarily a question of the material foreign policy of whether Kazakhstan stays in or leaves the EAEU. The institutional membership has remained stable across all the crises examined in this study. Rather, the puzzle is discursive and ideational: how do Kazakhstan's President talk about the EAEU, and how has that talk changed systematically across periods of geopolitical stress? Understanding this matters because, in post-Soviet polities where institutional change is slow and formal policy is rarely announced with transparency, discourse is often the primary observable indicator of elite recalibration. When the framing shifts from Eurasian

integration as shared destiny to pragmatic participation in a rules-based economic arrangement - something substantively political has changed, even if the treaty obligations remain identical.

The study of Kazakhstan's foreign policy discourse is marked by two interrelated gaps. First, the scholarship on Eurasian regionalism tends to privilege material and institutional analyses, examining trade statistics, treaty compliance, and power asymmetries within the EAEU (Karliuk, 2015; Vinokurov, 2017; Kirkham, 2016). These contributions are valuable, but they largely bracket the question of how ideas and discourse mediate Kazakhstan's relationship with the Union. Second, the Discursive Institutional literature, which offers precisely the analytical tools needed to study ideational dynamics, has rarely been applied to Central Asian cases. Vivien A. Schmidt's (2008) framework was developed primarily through Western European cases, and its extension to post-Soviet, semi-authoritarian contexts remains underexplored. This thesis addresses both gaps simultaneously by applying DI systematically to Kazakhstan's EAEU discourse across three analytically significant periods, while triangulating findings with novel data from Kazakhstan's administrative communication system and interviews.

Two research questions guide the inquiry. The primary question asks: how has Kazakhstan's official presidential discourse on the EAEU evolved across the periods of 2019-2021 (baseline), January 2022 protests and 2022 Russia-Ukraine war? This question focuses on identifying systematic patterns of change and continuity in discursive content, framing, and emphasis across time.

The second question asks: what discursive strategies do Kazakhstan's President employ to manage the tension between EAEU integration obligations and assertions of national sovereignty? This question examines the mechanisms of discursive adaptation, that is, the specific rhetorical

tools, frames, and legitimation strategies through which elites simultaneously sustain institutional membership and assert national agency.

The central argument of this thesis is that Kazakhstan's presidential discourse on the EAEU has undergone a pattern best described as “discursive reconstruction” (Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004; Schmidt, 2011). It's a sustained, systematic reframing of the Union's meaning and Kazakhstan's role within it, driven by successive geopolitical shocks, but organised according to a coherent ideational logic that predates those shocks. The repositioning is adaptive because it preserves institutional membership while altering the terms of legitimation; it is discursive because the primary observable changes are in language, framing, and salience rather than in formal policy.

More specifically, dominant framing (Schmidt, 2011), which is the main interpretive lens through which political actors present an issue, highlighting certain aspects while downplaying others to shape how it is understood within discourse - has shifted from integrationist-Eurasianist discourse (emphasising shared identity, historical destiny, and the EAEU as Kazakhstan's central creation) toward a sovereignty-pragmatic register (emphasising economic functionalism, institutional equality, Kazakhstan's veto rights, and the EAEU as one platform among many in a diversified foreign policy portfolio). This shift is not uniform; elements of continuity persist, and in different contexts emphasized different elements, but the directional trend is consistent and analytically traceable.

A secondary argument concerns the mechanism of this repositioning. The thesis contends that communicative discourse, or public-facing elite statements, is not merely a reflection of internal coordinative discourse but constitutes an independent site of agency. Kazakhstan's leaders use public communication to repackage institutional constraints as sovereign choices, to signal recalibration to international audiences without formal policy announcements, and to stabilise

domestic legitimacy by anchoring EAEU participation in pragmatic rather than ideological terms. This finding extends DI theory by demonstrating that in semi-authoritarian, post-Soviet contexts, the communicative-coordinative distinction operates differently than in consolidated democracies: the communicative sphere carries heavier ideational weight precisely because coordinative discourse is less institutionalised and less transparent.

Kazakhstan is selected as the case study not for convenience but for theoretical and empirical significance. As the second-largest economy in the EAEU after Russia and the Union's only founding member to have articulated a clear “economic-only” position on integration, Kazakhstan occupies a structurally unique position that makes its discourse analytically distinctive. It is a secondary power in a union dominated by a larger neighbour - a configuration that generates the kind of ideational tension that DI is well-equipped to examine. Kazakhstan is also a case of particular geopolitical salience: its simultaneous membership in the EAEU, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and its deep engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative, combined with its significant Western energy investment partnerships, makes it an exemplary case of multi-vectorism under pressure.

The timing of the study is equally significant. The period 2019-2025 is, arguably, the most discursively eventful in Kazakhstan's post-Soviet history: the transfer of power from Nazarbayev to Tokayev in 2019, the January 2022 Qantar uprising, Russia Ukraine war in February 2022, and the subsequent sanctioning of Russia all constitute shocks that compelled elite discourse to adapt. No prior study has directly examined Kazakhstan's EAEU discourse across all three of these junctures using a systematic discourse-analytic framework.

Recent scholarship highlights that moments of crisis do not necessarily produce immediate policy reversals, but often operate as discursive stress tests that reshape elite rhetoric and public

justification strategies. Studies on elite cueing and crisis discourse demonstrate that leaders reconsider the language, emphasis, and framing in response to perceived threat or uncertainty, even in the absence of formal institutional change (Noble, 2023; Simmons & Shaffer, 2023). This insight is particularly relevant for Kazakhstan, where the January 2022 events constituted a moment of domestic and geopolitical vulnerability. Rather than treating the crisis as a trigger for observable policy shifts within the EAEU, this thesis approaches it as a critical juncture for discursive adaptation in which elite narratives about sovereignty, integration, and alignment were renegotiated.

This research contributes to both the study of Eurasian regionalism and the field of discourse analysis in international relations. By applying Discursive Institutionalism (DI) to an “unorthodox” case of a post-Soviet state’s navigation of a Russian-led integration project - the thesis demonstrates the value of ideas and language in explaining policy evolution. The findings offer insights into how “secondary powers” like Kazakhstan employ discourse to maintain autonomy: for instance, by subtly reshaping narratives in response to power asymmetries within the EAEU often dominated by Russia. This study also sheds light on the legitimization tactics of authoritarian or semi-authoritarian elites. As Kazakhstan’s regime has historically derived legitimacy from economic performance and a stable foreign policy, examining shifts in rhetoric can reveal attempts to reformulate the “social contract” with citizens, especially after crises through promises of stability, prosperity, or national pride (Ibadildin & Pisareva, 2020; Insebayeva & Insebayeva, 2022).

From a theoretical standpoint, the research extends discursive institutionalist literature into Central Asia, a region less frequently examined with this lens. It highlights how ideational power operates in a non-Western context; how certain ideas (like “Eurasian unity” or “sovereign

equality”) gain or lose traction in official discourse. By focusing on discourse, the thesis captures nuance that purely institutional or quantitative analyses might miss: the ambivalence, hesitations, and narrative “smoothings” that accompany policy adjustments. This is particularly significant given Kazakhstan’s delicate balancing act - the language it uses internationally can signal alignment or dissent in ways that formal policy may not overtly state.

In terms of societal relevance, understanding elite discourse around the EAEU can inform observers of Central Asian geopolitics about the country’s true strategic priorities. Given Kazakhstan’s importance as a regional actor and its role in multilateral bodies, shifts in its narrative may presage policy changes that affect economic cooperation, security arrangements (like the Collective Security Treaty Organization), and the balance of influence between great powers in Eurasia. Moreover, for Kazakhstan’s citizens and neighboring states, the government’s discourse provides cues about national identity and foreign alignment - for instance, a move toward language of sovereignty could resonate with domestic nationalist sentiments (as seen in rising Eurasia-skeptic groups). Thus, this study not only maps elite discourse but also aids in interpreting the undercurrents of Kazakhstan’s political direction in a time of global uncertainty.

The thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter One presents the literature review, situating the study in scholarship on Discursive Institutionalism, the EAEU's institutional structure, Kazakhstan's foreign policy, and geopolitical shocks as catalysts for discursive change. Chapter Two presents the theoretical framework, elaborating the DI concepts - coordinative and communicative discourse, ideational power, legitimation strategies - that structure the empirical analysis. Moreover, it sets out the methodology, including the dependent variable definition, periodisation, data sources, coding scheme, and triangulation approach. Chapter Three presents the empirical analysis, organised around the three periods, with an integrated discussion of DI mechanisms and triangulation

evidence. The conclusion directly answers the research questions, discussing theoretical and methodological implications, acknowledging limitations, and identifying directions for future research.

## Literature Review

### **Discursive Institutionalism in Foreign Policy**

Discursive Institutionalism (DI), as developed by Vivien A. Schmidt (2008), offers a framework to analyze this role by situating ideas and discourse at the center of institutional change. Schmidt argues that earlier strands of institutionalism (rational choice, historical, sociological) often treated ideas as secondary or “epiphenomenal”, whereas DI posits that ideas are themselves causal drivers of political action, communicated and solidified through discourse. In Schmidt’s formulation, “discourse” encompasses not just rhetoric but the interactive process through which ideas are generated, debated, and legitimized in a given institutional context. Crucially, DI differentiates between two levels of discourse: a coordinative discourse among policy elites (where ideas are developed and argued among decision-makers), and a communicative discourse between those elites and the broader public (where policy ideas are presented and justified to citizens). This two-tiered prism is highly relevant for analyzing Kazakhstan’s EAEU policy, as it directs attention both to internal elite deliberations and outward-facing statements.

Schmidt’s DI also introduces categories for the content of ideas. She identifies various types of ideas by their level of abstraction: policy ideas (specific proposals for action), programmatic ideas (broader frameworks or paradigms that organize policy, such as “multi-vectorism” as a guiding doctrine), and philosophical ideas (deep core principles and worldviews). Additionally, ideas can be categorized by their normative or cognitive nature. Cognitive ideas provide logical,

problem-solving justifications (answering “how” or “what works”), whereas normative ideas embed values and legitimize policies in terms of “what is right or appropriate”. In practice, political discourse often mixes the two: leaders might argue that EAEU membership brings tangible economic benefits (a cognitive, problem-solving claim) while also portraying it as a fulfillment of Kazakhstan’s Eurasian identity or destiny (a normative claim). DI suggests that successful discourse often requires resonance on both levels - it must “work” in practical terms and “feel right” in terms of values.

Complementing Schmidt’s theoretical framework, other scholars have provided tools for applying discourse analysis to foreign policy. Notably, Iver Neumann (2008) outlines a practical methodology for discourse analysis in International Relations. Neumann proposes a four-step approach: (1) situating the discourse in its broader cultural and historical context, (2) selecting and delimiting the “universe” of texts or cases for analysis, (3) identifying and mapping the dominant versus alternative representations within that discourse, and (4) layering the analysis to see how discourses at different levels (domestic and international) interact or conflict. This approach is particularly useful for the Kazakhstan’s case - step (1) reminds us that Kazakhstan’s discourse on Eurasian integration draws on historical narratives (from Eurasianism to post-Soviet nation-building), while steps (3) and (4) encourage us to see not just the official narrative but also any counter-narratives (for instance, nationalist skepticism of the EAEU) and how global discourses (like East-West geopolitics) intersect with local ones.

Empirically, Rico Isaacs (2010) provides an example of applying discourse-focused analysis to Kazakhstan’s political development. In studying Nursultan Nazarbayev’s rule, Isaacs examined the discourse of charismatic leadership and nation-building, showing how Nazarbayev was discursively constructed as the fatherly figure (“Papa”) of the nation. This narrative, imbued with

Max Weber's notion of charismatic authority, helped legitimize Nazarbayev's nearly three-decade rule by framing it as the source of stability and prosperity in Kazakhstan. Isaacs notes how regime-controlled discourse linked the first president's personal authority to Kazakhstan's post-Soviet success, often highlighting themes of economic growth and modernization as proof of benevolent leadership. Such studies underscore that Kazakhstan's foreign policy discourse (e.g., promoting Eurasian integration) cannot be separated from its domestic legitimation discourse - both are intertwined in portraying the regime as essential and beneficent. Indeed, Nazarbayev's promotion of "Eurasianism" in foreign policy had a dual role: externally, it justified closer ties with Russia and regional integration; internally, it reinforced a vision of Kazakhstan's unique identity and destiny that bolstered his regime's authority.

Vanderhill et al. (2020) formed a seminal realist research on Kazakhstan's multi-vector politics. They examined how Kazakhstan, as a secondary power, maintains its sovereignty and national interests while being in between Great Powers. Their work uses a qualitative case study approach, focusing on Kazakhstan's foreign policy from the 1990s until the 2020s. It includes a historical analysis of the evaluation of Kazakhstan's foreign policy since the beginning; discourse analysis of speeches, documents and statements of Kazakh elites including the first president N.A. Nazarbayev; and comparative analysis comparing Kazakhstan's international politics with other Central Asian states. It combines realist theories (like omni-enmeshment) with constructivist discourse analysis to show how "multi-vector" policy balanced between Russian security dependence and Chinese economic alignment.

Similarly, Ksenia Kirkham (2016) focused on the social factors, historical materialism and the relations between structure and agency. She divided the concept of hegemony into 4 parts – Institutional Design, Material Capabilities, Security Invulnerability and Cultural Leadership. And

Russian role within the EAEU is “transitional hegemony” that creates discursive contradictions for member states in the Union.

Qualitative research guides have also been influential. Ashley Rubin’s “Rocking Qualitative Social Science” (2021) provided practical advice on case selection and data analysis relevant to this study. Rubin emphasizes the importance of transparently justifying why a case is chosen and what can or cannot be inferred from it - a principle followed in highlighting Kazakhstan’s significance and the timing of its recent upheavals. Rubin also discusses coding techniques, distinguishing open coding (deriving codes from data) and focused coding (refining codes to themes of interest). This directly influenced the two-phase coding strategy employed in discourse analysis. Additionally, Rubin’s mention of CAQDAS tools (like NVivo) and analytic memos encouraged the use of software to organize the data and the writing of reflective memos during analysis, enhancing rigor. Finally, Dimiter Toshkov’s *Research Design in Political Science* (2016) offered foundational clarity on framing research questions and the deductive vs. inductive approach. Toshkov’s work reinforced the design of this study as a blend of theory-testing and theory-building, ensuring a balanced methodology.

Andrew Bennett’s (2022) work added limitations of single-case research by explaining that the evidence supporting his chapter were actual case studies (including the Ebola epidemic); referring to Oxford professor Bent Flyvbjerg’s experience of facing the dilemma of single-case problems being criticized for problems of generalizations in single-case studies; presentation of four main ways of generalizations including typical-case generalization, most - least - likely cases generalization, mechanism-based generalization and typological generalization. Since the panned research is mostly related to single-case studies within Kazakhstan’s framework, it might face

certain problems in generalization in case of lack of empirical evidence from regime and theory explanation.

In sum, the theoretical and methodological literature establishes that to understand Kazakhstan's behavior in the EAEU, one must take ideas and discourse seriously. A Discursive Institutional perspective equips us to break down how Kazakhstan's leaders conceive of the EAEU (ideas about regional order, sovereignty, development) and how they communicate those conceptions in differing arenas. Prior studies of Kazakhstan's political discourse - from nation-building narratives to multi-vector positioning - provide context showing that rhetoric is carefully managed and often strategic. Building on these foundations, the next sections review scholarship on specific aspects relevant to research: the institutional structure of the EAEU, the impact of geopolitical crises on regional discourse, and the patterns of elite legitimation in Kazakhstan's policy rhetoric.

### **EAEU Institutional Structure: Institutions, Hegemony, and Elite Agency**

The Eurasian Economic Union's institutional design has frequently been compared to that of the European Union, both by politicians and scholars, often to identify its weaknesses and unique features. Maksim Karliuk (2015) provides a comprehensive analysis of the EAEU's institutional structure, legal autonomy, judicial authority, and decision-making processes. Karliuk notes that while the EAEU established supranational bodies, such as the Eurasian Economic Commission and a court. These institutions lack the enforcement power and independence of their EU counterparts. For example, member states retain considerable control over decision-making, exemplified by the so-called "Belarusian elevator" system, which ensures that key decisions move through

intergovernmental channels dominated by heads of state. This design reflects a built-in safeguard for sovereignty, limiting the EAEU's authority over its members. Karliuk's assessment emphasizes the limits of the EAEU as a supranational agency: it is more of an interstate arrangement reliant on consensus (often shaped by the largest member, Russia) than a rules-based entity that can compel compliance.

Building on this, Evgeny Vinokurov (2017) evaluates the EAEU's early performance and the challenges it faces. Vinokurov acknowledges certain "victories" of the integration process - for instance, the creation of a common customs area, increases in intraregional trade flows, and the signing of trade agreements with outside partners like China. These achievements suggest that the EAEU has had tangible economic effects and has developed a functional administrative capacity (e.g., the Eurasian Economic Commission). However, Vinokurov also stresses the "economic pragmatism" of member states and the pivotal role of national elites in shaping the narrative of integration. In practice, each member approaches the EAEU with calculations of costs and benefits, and they often portray the union to their domestic audience in pragmatic terms rather than idealistic ones. Vinokurov's analysis hints that discourse - how leaders talk about the EAEU - is a key factor in sustaining the union, as much as legal structures are. It's easier to keep the EAEU together if each country's elite can convincingly present it as beneficial and non-threatening to their nation.

Some scholars take a more critical position on the EAEU's design by highlighting the asymmetry of power within it. Ksenia Kirkham (2016) situates the EAEU in a framework of Russian hegemony and the interplay of structure and agency. Adapting concepts of hegemony, Kirkham divides it into four parts - Institutional Design, Material Capabilities, Security, and Cultural Leadership. She also evaluates Russia's role in each within the EAEU. She characterizes Russia's role as a "transitional hegemony", meaning Russia has significant influence but faces

constraints and does not exercise full control as it might wish. This scenario creates discursive contradictions for other member states: EAEU rhetoric emphasizes equality and mutual benefit, but the reality (and often the unspoken subtext) is that Russia is the *primus inter pares* whose interests often set the agenda. For Kazakhstan, this contradiction surfaces in its discourse: Kazakhstan's officials must balance acknowledging Russia's central role (to keep relations smooth) with asserting Kazakhstan's sovereign agency. We see, for instance, Kazakhstan occasionally pushing back in subtle ways - such as insisting that the EAEU remains an economic union with no political integration, implicitly countering Russian Eurasianists who envision deeper union. Kirkham's insights underscore why discourse matters: it is the arena where these power asymmetries are negotiated and either obscured or highlighted.

Another critical voice is that of B. Kheyfets (2019), who warns that the EAEU's attempt to mimic EU-style integration is fundamentally flawed given the different conditions of post-Soviet states. Kheyfets argues that transplanting the European integration model to Eurasia is a "fatal mistake" if done without adaptation, because the political economies of EAEU states (e.g., heavier reliance on extractive industries, patronage networks, less institutionalized rule of law) do not support the same kind of supranational governance. Indeed, early EAEU initiatives that mirrored EU structures often stalled or remained superficial. Kheyfets' critique implies that in discourse, too, a gap exists: EAEU official declarations often copy EU language about "four freedoms" or "common markets", but the practical and political commitment behind them is weaker. For Kazakhstan, aligning with this critique, one can observe that President Nazarbayev himself, despite being a chief architect of Eurasian integration, consistently emphasized phrases like "economic union not a political union", drawing a line that the EU does not draw so explicitly. This rhetorical distinction aimed to reassure skeptics that Kazakhstan was not ceding political control as part of

integration. In essence, Kheyfets and others highlight a core tension: the narrative of integration (prosperity, unity) versus the reality of cautious, sovereignty-conscious implementation, a tension that Kazakhstan's discourse has to carefully navigate.

In summary, the literature on the EAEU's structure reveals a union that is legally and institutionally constrained by member state sovereignty and dominated by its largest member. For the research purposes, this means Kazakhstan's leaders operate within an institutional environment that limits how far integration can go, which likely makes it easier for them to adjust their discourse without severely breaching any formal commitments. It also means that sudden geopolitical events (like sanctions on Russia or regional conflicts) can test the EAEU's cohesion because its institutions are not deeply entrenched - leaving it to political discourse and will to hold things together. The next part of the literature review examines how such geopolitical shocks have acted as catalysts for discursive shifts in Kazakhstan's foreign policy, as documented by recent studies.

### **Geopolitical Shocks as Catalysts for Discourse Shifts**

Major geopolitical events often compel states to reassess and sometimes recalibrate their official narratives. In the context of Eurasia, Russia's actions and regional crises have presented such shocks. Recent scholarship has begun to explore how Kazakhstan and its neighbors respond discursively to events like the Ukraine issue.

Ardak Yesdauletova et al. (2024) provide a timely analysis of Kazakhstan's foreign policy adjustments amid "geopolitical turbulence" - notably Russia's special operation against Ukraine. Their study finds that Kazakhstan's stance on the conflict, while constrained by its partnership with Moscow, has been quietly but clearly distancing. For example, Kazakhstan refused to recognize the

Russian-backed separatist entities in Eastern Ukraine and, despite Russian pressure, declined to participate in any Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) military operations related to the conflict. Yesdauletova and colleagues note that Kazakhstan's state media and officials refrained from echoing Russian justifications for the war; on the contrary, some high-level statements subtly affirmed principles of territorial integrity (implicitly supporting Ukraine's position without directly naming Russia as an aggressor). This nuanced negativity - "passively negative" as they term it - indicates a discursive shift: Kazakhstan is not openly opposing Russia, but it is carefully dissociating itself from Russia's narrative. For instance, President Tokayev at the June 2022 Saint Petersburg Economic Forum, in the presence of President Putin, stated Kazakhstan does not recognize quasi-state entities like "Luhansk and Donetsk". Such remarks, broadcast at home and abroad, signaled a new tone in Kazakhstan's foreign policy discourse: one that maintains formal respect toward Russia but asserts Kazakhstan's principles that diverge from Russian policy. This was a notable departure from earlier, more uniformly friendly rhetoric toward Russia and suggests the Ukraine issue has been a catalyst for Kazakhstan to emphasize its independent foreign policy line.

Political scientist Pauline Jones (2023) reinforces this observation, characterizing Kazakhstan's post-2022 foreign policy as a "rambling move" - essentially a realignment in rhetoric to downplay Russia and elevate other partners. According to Jones, after the Ukraine special operation, Kazakhstan's public communications pivoted: official statements became muted or silent about agreements with Russia, while simultaneously highlighting and accelerating economic and diplomatic initiatives with countries like China, Turkey, and those in Central Asia. For example, Kazakh media heavily covered President Tokayev's meetings with the Chinese and Turkish presidents, celebrating new trade deals and infrastructure projects, thus implicitly conveying that

Kazakhstan has options beyond Russia. Jones also argues that the very founding idea of the EAEU which is a mutually beneficial economic bloc - was brought into question by Russia-Ukraine conflict. Some Kazakhstan's elites began to view the EAEU less as a win-win arrangement and more as a Russian-centric project to consolidate influence in the region. This interpretation (that the EAEU serves to "accumulate power in the centre - Moscow") marks a significant shift from the earlier narrative of the EAEU as a realization of Nazarbayev's grand Eurasian integration vision. It reveals a nascent counter-discourse within Kazakhstan: skepticism about the EAEU's benefits and a desire for more balance. Notably, Jones points out that Kazakhstan's leaders did not frame their country as a passive victim of great power rivalry; rather, they emphasized proactive diversifications (such as new routes to bypass Russian transit or attracting Western investment), signaling a confident, sovereign stance. This is a delicate balancing act in discourse acknowledging discontent (with Russia's actions) without overtly antagonizing, which Kazakhstan's officials have so far managed with careful wording.

Geopolitical shocks also have indirect effects that enter discourse, particularly on economic and security fronts. One dimension is food and economic security amid the Ukraine war. Studies by Faqin Lin, Xuecao Li, et al. (2023) use scenario analysis to show how the Russia-Ukraine conflict threatens global and regional food security. According to the findings of the scholars in the discussion part, the sanctions towards Russia might restrict the state's exports considering the war status and adequate politics of more saved food sources. Secondly, due to the export sanctions towards Russia, which has significant value in other food-related sources – fertilizers, the welfare of Mongolia, Turkey, Georgia, Egypt and Azerbaijan might fall by 15-25%. Then, because of the climate issues and low growth rates caused by it in North America and Brazil, the global wheat trade might be harmed. Lastly, Lebanon, Sri Lanka and Egypt states that are vulnerable and

dependent on foreign food resources might be in a position of political imbalance and there are possibilities of revolutionary movements caused by the Ukraine-Russia conflict (Lin et al., p. 6). Whereas Zulfia Musarova and Chinara Adamkulova analyse food insecurity issues that boomed in Kyrgyzstan because of the conflict. The authors (pp. 424-425) mention how important Russia is in food security for Kyrgyzstan, since it accounts for 99 per cent of sugar, more than 80 per cent of vegetable oil, and 95 per cent of wheat in 2022. However, the conflict sharply decreased the export of sugar by 50 per cent, vegetable oil by 1 per cent and slightly increased wheat export by 2 per cent in 2023 (Musarova and Adamkulova, p. 425). Due to the war state, Russia decreased the supply of food sources and subsequently prices of wheat, for instance, increased by 27% comparing 2021 and 2022 March (Musarova and Adamkulova, p. 425).

Diana Kudaibergenova and Marlene Laruelle (2022) in their paper discussed the Qandy Qantar or Bloody January events that occurred in 2022. Their work explained the narratives of people who were raised, the historical roots that came to the first president and discourses among protesters. Also, the authors conclude the coup as the beginning of de-Nazarbayevication, and open up a discussion on new possible discourses after the coup. While not an external geopolitical event, it had international dimensions and profound implications for domestic legitimacy. In its aftermath, scholars have analyzed the discursive fallout. Diana Kudaibergenova and Marlene Laruelle (2022) interpret the January 2022 events as a turning point that accelerated a “de-Nazarbayevization” of Kazakhstan’s political narrative. During Nazarbayev’s presidency, the discourse was heavily centered on his persona and legacy - he was the founding father, the guarantor of stability, and the chief formulator of both domestic and foreign policy. The January events, which included public chants against Nazarbayev and the toppling of his statues in some places, shattered the taboo around criticizing the First President. Kudaibergenova and Laruelle note that in the wake of the

unrest, official discourse shifted: references to Nazarbayev and “Leader of the Nation” were markedly downplayed, and President Tokayev’s administration began crafting a new narrative of a “New Kazakhstan” to mark a break with the past. They describe the protests’ narratives - rooted in social grievances and calls for justice - and how these were co-opted or addressed by elites afterwards. The legitimation strategy after 2022 January unrest involved President Tokayev positioning himself as a reformer who would correct the excesses of the Nazarbayev era (even though he was Nazarbayev’s chosen successor). For foreign policy, this domestic discursive shift likely gave President Tokayev more leeway to adjust Kazakhstan’s stance: since Nazarbayev had been strongly associated with Eurasian integration (indeed, he originally proposed the Eurasian Union idea in the 1990s), stepping out of Nazarbayev’s shadow allowed President Tokayev to recalibrate EAEU rhetoric without it seeming like a personal affront to his predecessor’s legacy.

In summary, the literature on recent shocks shows Kazakhstan caught in cross-currents of change: Ukraine case pushing it to rhetorically differentiate itself from Russia, and domestic turmoil pushing it to redefine its leadership narrative. Both factors converge in influencing Kazakhstan’s discourse on the EAEU - likely steering it toward a more pragmatic and guarded register. The next section delves into how Kazakhstan’s elites have historically used discourse to legitimate their rule and policies, which will help interpret whether recent changes represent a fundamental shift or a tactical adjustment within an existing paradigm of multi-vector legitimation.

### **Elite Legitimation Strategies in Kazakhstan: Multi-Vectorism, “Neo-Eurasianism”, and Changing Narratives**

Aneschi (2020) was looking to reply to the policy question "What does it mean, in policy terms, to be an Eurasian state?" (Aneschi, p. 2). Neo-Eurasianism, according to Aneschi, was used by Nazarbaev to assist both ground belief systems and construct his administration in Kazakhstan's remote arrangement. The administration surrounded Kazakhstan within the setting of geopolitical Eurasia, a locale from Eastern Europe to Central Asia, which made a difference develop a method of reasoning for both why the nation thinks and why it must be ruled by Nazarbaev. By making it outlandish to conversation almost Eurasianism, Aneschi depicts this variation of neo-Eurasianism as "administration neo-Eurasianism" and joins it inseparably with the dictator structures that characterized Kazakhstan's household legislative issues of the time.

One of the foremost exceptional *métier* of Aneschi's investigations is his capacity to associate macro-level geopolitical investigation with micro-level experiences into Kazakhstan's inside legislative issues. Aneschi did a fabulous work of arranging Kazakhstan's outside legislative issues within the post-Soviet geopolitical setting with the inner flow interior the nation. A multi-level approach let Aneschi investigate more point by point and shed light on the significance of both inside and outside components while dissecting Kazakhstan's case. The book contains five chapters, each of them managing diverse perspectives of Kazakhstan's external policy and interfacing it with the hypothesis of neo-Eurasianism. The first chapter focuses on the *integratsiya* (integration) politics before the Eurasianism in 1991-1993. N.A. Nazarbayev advocated for closer integration with the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). He saw this as a solution to the economic and ethnic issues that Kazakhstan faced after gaining independence. Chapter 2 reveals the foundation of the neo-Eurasianist agenda, whose turning point was N.A. Nazarbayev's 1994 speech at Moscow State University. This chapter also compares different points of view regarding the neo-Eurasianism, when some perceive it as a re-integration of the collapsed Soviet Union, for

Kazakhstan and especially propaganda it was a term created and implemented by the president as an *evraziiskaya strategiya* (Eurasian strategy). The third chapter opens up an answer to the question of why Kazakhstan couldn't become a leader in the Central Asian region. Despite having a large number of natural resources and certainly, a beneficial geographical position between tiger and bear connecting them to Europe, Kazakhstan failed the attempts to become a leader in the region. He traces it to several factors including the clash of interests of other Central Asian countries, particularly Uzbekistan under Islam Karimov, and dynamics in the region. Chapter 4 explores two initialization mechanisms of Eurasianism - the Eurasian Union (*Evraziiskii Soyuz*) and the Customs Union. They were crucial in the process of N.A. Nazarbayev's reintegration process through different socio-economic policies at that time. "Nezavisimaya Gazeta" a local Russian news press called N.A. Nazarbayev was a de facto leader in the forming of the Customs Union in 1998 (Anceschi, p. 107). The last chapter of the book opens a new theme of a resistance process from 2014 between the citizens and the government of Kazakhstan. The move from Eurasianism to anti-eurasianism due to geopolitical factors such as a Crimean crisis that was countered by a new *nats-patrioty* (national patriots) and similar Eurasia-scepticist groups in Kazakhstan that shaped the national policy has been a clear focus of the chapter. Anceschi's ideas parallel with "pragmatic union", reflecting Schmidt's policy ideas.

Adding to that, Diana T. Kudaibergenova (2016) wrote a brilliant work analyzing social and political discourses surrounding Eurasian integration specifically focusing on two cases – Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The study was built on a mixed-method approach mixing historical analysis, elite interviews, sociological data and comparative analysis. It traces back to the 1990s to the 2016s analyzing elite rhetoric, speeches and crucial policies. The author also used the Eurasian Integration Barometer in order to understand

public perception of and attitude towards EAEU. The comparison of two “-stans” Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan highlights different elite strategies and public opinions and parallels with the research goals of the thesis.

Nyshanbayev et al. (2024) offer a timely, empirically rich analysis of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy under the presidency of President Tokayev. They highlight the role of multi-vectorism as a discursive and strategic tool for maintaining regime legitimacy in view of rapidly changing geopolitical pressures. The authors underline that President Tokayev has maintained the constitutive logic of multi-vectorism intact but changed its articulation to reflect a post-Nazarbayev institutional style characterized by policy pragmatism rather than personalized symbolism. This article will be of particular interest for those willing to understand Kazakhstan's elite legitimization strategies in the aftermath of the January 2022 unrest and Russia's war in Ukraine. What it does is demonstrate how, under the President Tokayev administration, Kazakhstan increasingly uses its relations with the United States and the European Union to foreground a diversification strategy without openly denying the commitments arising from membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. The authors underpin several important discursive patterns, such as the use of sovereignty-affirming rhetoric by President Tokayev and strategic framing of the Western partnerships in terms of technological modernization and investment attractiveness-the moves sharply contrasting with a more cautious, economy-centric narrative when talking about the EAEU. The authors thus note that dual messaging has emerged, reflecting a refined legitimization strategy geared both towards international alignment and reassurance at home. Equally importantly, this article situates these discursive shifts within broader theoretical debates on the ways of geopolitical congestion for the choices of secondary powers. This provides a useful resource to discourse-institutionalist readings of Kazakhstan's foreign policy adjustment.

While much focus is on high politics, Sebastian Schiek (2022) examines a domestic institutional innovation (the National Council of Public Trust (NCPT)) and its discourse in Kazakhstan. The NCPT was established by President Tokayev in 2019 amid calls for political reform. Schiek interprets the NCPT as part of a “politics of stability” where the regime seeks to depoliticize potential opposition by co-opting dialogue. The Council’s narrative is all about consultation and inclusion, but in a controlled way. According to Schiek, this serves to legitimize the regime by portraying it as responsive and reformist, while actually bypassing genuine pluralism. Protest movements and independent civil society are thereby delegitimized as unnecessary or extremist, since the government can claim “we have a dialogue platform, use that”. This is a classic authoritarian legitimation move, using the discourse of democracy (dialogue and trust) to reinforce authoritarian control (all dialogue happens on the state’s terms). In the context of my study, Schiek’s findings are a reminder that domestic discourse strategies (like the NCPT) can influence foreign policy positioning too.

On the topic of social contracts and legitimacy, Nygmet Ibadildin and Dinara Pisareva (2020) explore how Kazakhstan’s governance model has been justified before and after Nazarbayev’s term. They describe Kazakhstan as follower to a “rentier state social contract” mode, meaning the state delivers economic growth and social benefits (fueled by oil revenues) while citizens acquiesce to political authoritarianism. This contract, akin to what they call “welfare state authoritarianism” was more or less stable during economic growth periods, but started to strain when economic troubles hit (like after the 2014 oil price drop) and as a younger generation became more vocal. Ibadildin and Pisareva highlight critical junctures: the failed elite challenge in 2001, the Zhanaozen strikes in 2011, and protests in 2016. Each incident exposed cracks in the prevailing narrative that traded prosperity for freedom. By the time President Tokayev took over, the old formula

was questioned, and the January 2022 events fully shattered it, as economic grievances merged with political ones. The authors suggest President Tokayev has attempted some liberalization moves (like political reforms, socioeconomic promises), but his legitimacy remains uncertain as it's unclear what new social contract will emerge. For foreign policy discourse, this uncertainty means President Tokayev must be attentive to national sentiment; he cannot rely solely on the old Nazarbayev-era tropes of stability and prosperity since those were tarnished by January 2022.

Finally, in looking beyond Kazakhstan, scholars have found it useful to compare how other countries in the region manage similar dilemmas. Arthur Atanesyan et al. (2024), for example, examine Armenia's "complementarism", which is a strategy very much similar to multi-vectorism, where Armenia tries to balance between Russia and the West. Their study, which includes discourse analysis, notes a striking change in Armenian public opinion and elite rhetoric in recent years: a sharp westward tilt in the face of security failures by Russia (e.g., in Nagorno-Karabakh). Survey data they cite shows Armenians considering France an "ally" jumped from 17% in 2019 to 84% in 2022, while those seeing Russia as an ally plummeted from 83% (in 2013) to 56% in 2022. This suggests that when a patron (Russia) is seen as faltering, even a traditionally Russia-aligned population can rapidly rethink its orientation. The parallel to Kazakhstan is not exact - Kazakhstan has not faced a war akin to Armenia's situation, and Russia has not overtly failed Kazakhstan in security (indeed, it helped President Tokayev in January 2022). However, the lesson is that alignments and discourses in Eurasia are malleable and can change quickly under pressure. Kazakhstan's elites are surely aware of these shifts; they likely take note that younger, urban Kazakhs might, like many Armenians, prefer a more diversified foreign policy that isn't overly Russia-centric. The comparative angle reinforces that Kazakhstan's multi-vector discourse, often

admired as successful, is not unique - and others' experiences (like Armenia's pivot) could inform or embolden Kazakhstan's own discursive recalibrations.

A recurring theme in these studies is the emphasis on gaining a grounded understanding of elite perspectives. As noted by Bennett (2022), relying only on public texts can miss nuances that direct elite communications (like confidential interviews or internal debates) might reveal. While such data are hard to obtain in Kazakhstan's context (given the opacity of its elite politics), this thesis acknowledges that its discourse analysis is essentially of the observable discourse. I interpret what leaders say and what is published, which is a product aimed at audiences and often part of the legitimation strategy itself. Thus, the literature reminds us to remain cautious and discerning: sometimes the most interesting aspect of discourse is what is not said or what is hinted at only obliquely. For example, the absence of references to "Eurasian brotherhood" in recent Kazakh speeches, where such phrases were common ten years ago, can be as telling as explicit new statements.

## Theoretical Framework

To analyze the evolution of Kazakhstan's discourse within the EAEU, this study adopts Discursive Institutionalism (DI) as its primary theoretical framework. Discursive Institutionalism, as articulated by Vivien A. Schmidt and others, provides a dynamic way to understand the interplay of ideas, discourse, and institutional context. It is particularly well-suited for this research for several reasons: it treats policy changes as driven not just by material forces or institutional rules, but by the ideas that actors hold and communicate; it explicitly distinguishes different types of

discourse and their audiences; and it accommodates the analysis of both continuity and change in a country's policy narrative.

At its core, DI posits that “ideas matter” - that is, the policy preferences of actors and the outcomes we observe are significantly shaped by underlying ideas (beliefs, norms, problem definitions) that actors have. However, ideas do not exist in a vacuum; they are disseminated, contested, and solidified through discourse. Therefore, discourse is the crucial vehicle that allows ideas to exert influence in the political sphere. In this view, discourse is not mere rhetoric or epiphenomena; it is constitutive of political action. Leaders and institutions use discourse to construct reality (framing an economic union as a path to prosperity or a threat to sovereignty) and to legitimate their actions (explaining and justifying why certain choices are made).

A key contribution of DI is the distinction between coordinative and communicative discourse. These two forms address different audiences and serve different functions:

Coordinative Discourse refers to the discussion and negotiation of ideas among elite policy actors within the decision-making process. This is typically an in-group conversation - for example, Kazakhstan's ministers and advisors debating how to handle EAEU trade regulations, or private deliberations among Eurasian Economic Commission officials and member state representatives. In coordinative discourse, actors exchange arguments, craft common narratives, and attempt to reach a shared understanding that will underpin a policy. It often happens “behind closed doors” or in specialized forums, and its language may be technical or strategic, reflecting its role in generating and refining policy ideas.

Communicative Discourse, by contrast, is the public-facing conversation where policy actors communicate their ideas to the general public, the media, and broader audiences outside the

policy core. This includes presidential speeches, press conferences, public statements, and official media articles intended to justify and legitimize policies in the public eye. Communicative discourse simplifies and packages the ideas developed in the coordinative realm into narratives that resonate with citizens' values or address their concerns. For instance, when President Tokayev speaks at the Parliament or in a televised interview about the EAEU, he is engaging in communicative discourse - explaining what the EAEU means for ordinary Kazakhs, why Kazakhstan participates, and how it aligns with national interests.

While Discursive Institutionalism distinguishes analytically between coordinative and communicative discourse, recent scholarship emphasises that communicative discourse constitutes a critical site of agency in its own right. Boswell (2016) shows that public-facing discourse is not merely derivative of internal coordination, but an arena where actors actively reinterpret constraints, justify trade-offs, and stabilise contested policies. Leipold and Winkel (2016) similarly conceptualise discourse as a form of practice through which actors validate legitimacy and manage conflict. Due to the lack of transparency in elite decision-making in Kazakhstan and the restricted access to internal policy discussions, this study focuses directly on communicative discourse rather than using it to infer internal coordination, treating it as the key source for examining ideational change.

Schmidt (2008) emphasizes that successful policy change often requires effectiveness in both forms of discourse. A policy proposal might be well-formulated among elites (strong coordinative discourse), but if it fails to be persuasive or acceptable to the public (weak communicative discourse), it can encounter legitimacy problems and resistance. Conversely, a policy might be sold well to the public but lack genuine buy-in or clarity among policymakers, leading to inconsistent implementation.

Applying this to Kazakhstan and the EAEU: We must consider, for example, how Kazakhstan's officials talk about EAEU issues among themselves or with other EAEU members (perhaps more frank about concerns, more detailed on technical issues) versus how they present EAEU membership to the Kazakhstan's public (emphasizing benefits, minimizing downsides or contentious aspects). By analyzing both internal-oriented documents (like transcripts of Eurasian Economic Council meetings, if available, or leaks/insider accounts reported) and outward communications (like national addresses, interviews), we can capture a fuller picture of Kazakhstan's discourse. In practice, our data is richer on the communicative side (since many coordinative discussions are confidential), but we infer coordinative discourse content from speeches that hint at prior negotiations or from policy documents.

Another critical concept in this theoretical framework is "ideational power". Introduced by Schmidt and elaborated by Carstensen and Schmidt (2016), ideational power is defined as the capacity of actors to influence other actors' beliefs through ideas. It recognizes that power in politics is not only about material coercion or institutional positions, but also about whose ideas prevail. Carstensen and Schmidt outline three types of ideational power:

**Power Through Ideas:** the ability of actors to persuade others to adopt their views via argumentation, reasoning, and discourse (Schmidt, 2010; Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016; Schmidt, 2017). This is essentially discursive or persuasive power. For instance, if Kazakhstan's diplomats manage to convince other EAEU members to agree to a policy by presenting it compellingly as mutually beneficial, they exert power through ideas. On the home front, if Tokayev persuades the public that a certain foreign policy stance is wise, that's power through ideas at work. Simmons and Shaffers (2023) illustrates how political elite use anxiety based but controlled language to guide public interpretation of external dangers, thereby narrowing the range of acceptable responses.

Noble (2023) likewise shows that elite signals can align broader political discourse by signaling how events should be interpreted, even without formal policy change.

**Power Over Ideas:** the capacity to control the prevailing ideas by excluding or marginalizing alternative viewpoints (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016). This is about gatekeeping in the discourse - ensuring certain arguments don't gain traction. In Kazakhstan, the state's control over media and public discourse meant that opposing ideas - say, a nationalist critique that EAEU membership undermines sovereignty - were kept at the fringes or silenced (Anceschi, 2015). When the government sets the agenda such that only its narrative of EAEU (as economically good and sovereignty-neutral) is heard, it is exercising power over ideas. However, with the slight opening of discourse post-2019 and especially after 2022, some alternative ideas have surfaced like open public debates on whether to use Russian-led financial systems or seek alternatives with risen Anti-Eurasian sentiments (Malikbayeva & Gabdullin, 2022). Observing how the state responds - whether it accommodates or suppresses these - will show us power over ideas in action.

**Power In Ideas:** this refers to the deeper, often invisible power of certain ideas that have become institutionalized or hegemonic, by shaping what is even considered thinkable (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016). Power in ideas manifests when an idea so pervades policy discourse that it constrains actors without needing active proponents. For example, the neoliberal idea of open markets can structure policy options. In Kazakhstan's case, one might argue that the concept of "multi-vectorism" itself wields power in ideas: it's taken as a given in Kazakhstan's foreign policy that balancing is good and alignment is suspect, which means any discourse automatically frames policies in multi-vector terms. Leaders don't question whether to have a multi-vector approach - it's an accepted paradigm that guides all their discussions (thus, the idea holds power). Similarly, the normative commitment to sovereignty and equal partnership among post-Soviet states is a powerful

idea; even Russia, when discussing the EAEU, has to pay lip service to each member's equality (even if behavior differs). When Tokayev asserts Kazakhstan's sovereign right to make decisions, he is invoking a widely held ideational structure that limits how others can respond (Russia cannot openly dismiss that principle without undermining the EAEU's stated ethos) (Anceschi, 2020).

Börzel (2021) demonstrates that member states embedded in hierarchical or imbalanced regional orders often engage in rhetorical strategies that contest dominant interpretations without directly challenging institutional membership. Similarly, Schmidt (2022) conceptualises contestation not only as populist opposition but as a discursive reconstruction of discontent that can occur within governing elites themselves. Applied to the EAEU context, this suggests that Kazakhstan's discourse need not reject integration outright to signal discomfort or recalibration. Oppositely, shifts in emphasis from collective advancement to sovereign equality or pragmatic cooperation can function as subtle forms of ideational contestation aimed at renegotiating meaning rather than rules.

Understanding ideational power is crucial for the analysis because shifts in Kazakhstan's discourse may reflect shifts in power through/over/in ideas. For instance, if we detect that previously taboo topics (like questioning the benefits of EAEU integration) are now openly discussed, that indicates the government is losing some power over ideas and possibly a change in what ideas have power in the public sphere.

Related to ideational power is the notion of legitimation strategies, which are the ways in which political actors make policies acceptable and justify their authority. From a DI perspective, legitimation is largely a discursive process - it's about how you talk about policies to align them with people's values and expectations. In the coding of Kazakhstan's elite discourse, I pay attention to these strategies. The deductive coding scheme already anticipated some of this: "problem-

solving vs. norm-based appeals” in legitimation. A problem-solving (pragmatic) appeal is when leaders legitimate a policy by saying it will fix a concrete issue or provide a benefit. A norm-based (value) appeal is when legitimacy comes from saying the policy is the right thing to do in principle. Throughout the period studied, Kazakhstan’s discourse likely mixes these, but their proportions may change. We might find that earlier discourse under Nazarbayev had stronger norm-based Eurasianist appeals emphasizing common culture and destiny, whereas Tokayev-era discourse might lean more on problem-solving appeals (emphasizing concrete gains, while norms-based language shifts towards sovereignty and international law). If so, that indicates a shift in legitimation strategy, reflecting a repositioning of how the regime wants to be viewed both domestically and externally.

In DI, institutions are not just formal rules but also the context that structures discourse - what Schmidt calls the “meaning context”. Kazakhstan’s foreign policy institutions (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Aqorda, the various intergovernmental bodies of the EAEU) provide platforms and also constraints for discourse. For example, within the Eurasian Economic Commission, discourse is somewhat technocratic and must abide by diplomatic protocols - that’s an institutional constraint shaping coordinative discourse. Nationally, the informal institution of presidential authority in Kazakhstan means that once the President articulates a stance, other officials typically align with that line in their discourse (a top-down institutional discourse flow). Understanding these contexts allows us to interpret why certain things are said the way they are. Under Nazarbayev, the institution of the presidency was tied to his personal legacy, so officials often cited Nazarbayev’s words (authorization strategy) to legitimise policies (Isaacs, 2010). Under Tokayev, there was a transition period where that had to change - Tokayev had to establish his own authority and narrative (Ibadildin & Pisareva, 2020; Anceschi & Silvan, 2026) (we see a shift from constant

references to “Elbasy” Nazarbayev towards phrases like “Jana Kazakhstan”). Thus, institutional change (leadership change) directly feeds into discursive change.

## Methods

### Research Design and Approach

This study employs a qualitative single-case study design focused on Kazakhstan, using the tools of discourse analysis within the framework of Discursive Institutionalism (Toshkov, 2016; Rubin, 2021; Bennett, 2022). The overarching approach is interpretivist, aiming to understand the meanings and narratives that Kazakhstan’s elites construct around the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), rather than to test a positivist hypothesis about material variables (Van de Sande et al, 2011). By design, the research is exploratory and explanatory: it explores how discourse has changed over time and seeks to explain those changes in relation to institutional and geopolitical developments.

Guided by Schmidt’s (2008) DI framework, the analysis differentiates between “coordinative discourse” (idea exchange among policy elites) and “communicative discourse” (public-facing legitimization of policy). In practical terms, this means the research looks at both internal communications (where available) and external communications:

Internal (Coordinative) Sources: transcripts from high-level meetings (Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meetings), speeches delivered by Kazakhstan’s officials in closed regional summits, and possibly Wikileaks or insider accounts that shed light on what Kazakhstan’s leaders argue behind closed doors (Ibadildin & Pisareva, 2020). These sources are admittedly limited due

to access; much coordinative discourse is not public; presidential addresses to the nation (such as annual State of the Nation speeches), press conferences, policy statements released to the public, op-eds by high-ranking officials, and messaging on social media by government accounts. These are abundant and crucial for seeing how the government legitimises EAEU policy to the public.

The central analytical objective is to trace shifts in Kazakhstan's foreign policy discourse toward the EAEU over time, with particular attention to the transition from Nazarbayev to Tokayev and the impact of the 2022 crises. Rather than treating policy as a black box, the design examines speeches and texts as data that reflect how policymakers understand and portray the EAEU's significance. This is important because the inquiry is not "what did Kazakhstan's elite do in the EAEU?" but "how did Kazakhstan's elite talk about what it is doing in the EAEU, and why did that talk change?".

By using a single-case design, the study can deeply contextualize Kazakhstan's discourse without the need to flatten differences for cross-case comparison (Bennett, 2022). Kazakhstan is chosen because it is theoretically interesting (a secondary power balancing influence) and data-rich in terms of official discourse. The drawback of a single case - limited generalizability - is mitigated by relating findings to theoretical concepts (DI) that can apply to other cases, and by drawing occasional contrasts with other countries (as seen in the literature review) to highlight what is unique or typical about Kazakhstan's experience (Bennett, 2022).

This approach aligns with calls in qualitative IR research for "process tracing" of ideational change: we will identify potential causal links between events (January 2022 protests, February 2022 Russia-Ukraine war outbreak) and discursive responses (changes in rhetoric), and then trace the sequence of discourse before, during, and after these events. In methodological terms, this study adopts process tracing not as a variable-based design but as a way to reconstruct how discursive

change unfolds over time. Furthermore, process tracing is particularly suited to research questions that focus on meaning, interpretation, and ideational shifts rather than on observable policy outcomes. As Beach (2016) and Beach and Pedersen (2013); Bennett et al. (2014); Beach, Derek and Rasmus Brun Pedersen's (2019) evaluated, the core strength of process tracing lies in identifying and tracing causal mechanisms within a single case, rather than testing correlations across cases. In this thesis, political events such as the January 2022 unrest and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine function as critical moments that potentially trigger discursive adjustment. The analysis therefore traces how Kazakhstan's elite discourse about the EAEU evolves before, during, and after these events, focusing on the sequence and content of rhetorical shifts rather than on changes in formal policy behavior. This allows the study to open the black box of foreign policy discourse and to examine how ideas are rearticulated in response to crisis, consistent with interpretivist and discursive approaches in International Relations. The goal is to construct a narrative explanation that links cause (events, institutional changes), mechanism (elite deliberation and rhetoric shifts), and effect (new policies or stances, or reaffirmation of old ones with new language).

In addition, Bennett's (2008) work on process tracing emphasizes that the method is particularly useful for explaining how outcomes emerge through sequences of interpretation and choice rather than through simple cause-effect relationships. Bennett (2008) argues that process tracing allows researchers to reconstruct how actors understand events, react to them, and adjust their reasoning over time, making it especially suitable for studies of ideas, discourse, and interpretation. In this thesis, process tracing is therefore used to examine how Kazakhstan's elites responded discursively to key events by reinterpreting their relationship with the EAEU, rather than to test whether those events mechanically caused specific policy changes. This approach aligns with

the study's focus on discourse as both an object of analysis and a mechanism through which political meaning is produced and stabilized.

Importantly, a caveat of the design is that it infers internal thought processes from observable discourse. We assume that discourse, while sometimes strategic, is a reliable indicator of the ideas held by elites - an assumption grounded in DI theory, which contends that even when discourse is strategic, it is revealing of the constraints and possibilities within which actors operate (Schmidt, 2011). Nonetheless, alternative explanations (like pure realism or material pressures) are not ignored; rather, they are incorporated as part of what the discourse is responding to or as part of the narrative ("due to sanctions, we had to...", and other narratives.).

The dependent variable in this study is "discursive change". The study uses explaining-outcome process tracing (Beach, 2016; Beach and Pedersen, 2013). This is the form of process tracing relevant for the thesis because the goal is not to test whether a general theory predicts an outcome across cases, nor to build a new causal theory inductively from scratch. The aim is to explain a specific outcome within one historically and institutionally bounded case: the discursive reconstruction of Kazakhstan's EAEU narrative between 2019 and 2025.

The outcome to be explained is not a formal policy reversal, withdrawal, or treaty change. Explaining-outcome process tracing is well suited to this task because it allows the analysis to reconstruct how this outcome emerged across a sequence of political shocks, institutional settings, and discursive responses.

In this thesis, process tracing is therefore used to reconstruct how key events and contexts interacted with existing ideational commitments to produce a rearticulated discourse. The crucial analytical theory sequence is as follows: an existing baseline discourse already framed the EAEU as

acceptable primarily in economic and treaty-bounded terms; the January 2022 unrest intensified domestic legitimization pressures and elevated sovereignty as a salient public anchor; the February 2022 war and sanctions environment increased the reputational and geopolitical sensitivity of Russia-centered integration; and these pressures were then managed through a discursive strategy that reaffirmed membership while redefining its meaning in more pragmatic, conditional, and externally diversified terms. The empirical analysis traces this sequence across two time frames and across multiple discursive arenas.

This use of process tracing is therefore mechanism-oriented, but the mechanism is discursive rather than materialist. The thesis does not claim a mechanical causal law that automatically produces discursive change. Instead, it shows how crises functioned as discursive stress tests that made certain ideas more salient, rendered some frames less usable, and encouraged elites to stabilise institutional continuity through rhetorical reconstruction (). Process tracing is employed here to identify the temporal sequence, interpretive shifts, and recurring discursive moves through which that outcome became visible. Discursive change is thus distinguished from mere rhetorical variation or opportunistic inconsistency. A single speech emphasising sovereignty in response to a specific incident does not constitute DI; a consistent pattern across speeches, institutional contexts, and speakers across a period does. The analytical task is to identify such patterns, compare them across periods, and assess their direction and magnitude.

The empirical puzzle is not whether Kazakhstan abruptly “turns against” the EAEU, but how it continuously rearticulates what the EAEU is and what Kazakhstan is (and is not) doing inside it when the surrounding institutional and geopolitical environment changes. This is why a Discursive Institutional (DI) lens is analytically productive: DI treats policy (and its evolution) as

mediated through discourse, where ideas are not merely rhetorical decoration but causal elements in institutional reproduction and (time to time) change.

The data show that the period 2019-2025 is not best understood as a linear move from “integrationism” to “withdrawal.” Instead, it is a sequence of discursive adjustments that allow Kazakhstan to remain institutionally inside the EAEU while renegotiating the meaning and its limits of membership. Three findings structure the argument.

Throughout the chapter, I focus specifically on speeches delivered by President Tokayev in EAEU settings (Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meetings and Eurasian Economic Forum speeches), treating them as hybrid discursive arenas. Formally, these are elite forums. Discursively, they are also communicative performances aimed at domestic and international audiences. This duality matters: Kazakhstan’s leaders are speaking both to other EAEU members and through the EAEU stage to signal boundaries, reassurance, and positioning.

Empirically, the chapter draws on the NVivo-exported coded corpus (2019-2025) contained in the spreadsheet and applies the provided DI-grounded coding strategy. The analysis prioritizes EAEU-related segments from Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meetings (2020-2024) and Eurasian Economic Forum segments (2022-2025), while using selected parliamentary-facing/communicative texts (State of the Nation addresses) mainly to interpret domestic legitimation requirements that shape EAEU messaging. The interpretive strategy is thus consistent with the methodological premise that communicative discourse is itself a key arena of agency and not merely a “reflection” of internal coordination.

### **Data handling, coding strategy, and analytic procedure**

A two-phase coding strategy was employed. The first phase involved open coding across a sample of texts from each period, allowing categories to emerge inductively from the data. The second phase applied a focused coding scheme refined from the first phase and from the DI theoretical framework. The coding was conducted using NVivo 15 software (See Appendix A).

Three primary framing categories were identified and applied. The Integration Framing category captures discourse that presents EAEU membership in terms of shared identity, historical belonging, or the inherent value of regional unity. Key indicators include: references to "Eurasian family", "common space", "Nazarbayev's initiative", "historical ties", "shared destiny"; framing of integration as valuable in itself beyond specific economic outcomes; use of "we" inclusive of the EAEU collective. Example: "Kazakhstan has made a historic contribution to advancing the ideas of Eurasian integration. It was here at the beginning of the century that the Eurasian Economic Community was established, and a number of important decisions were made that determined the course and dynamics of our integration process." (Nazarbayev, 2014).

The Sovereignty Framing category captures discourse that foregrounds Kazakhstan's national prerogatives, rights within the EAEU framework, and resistance to supranational encroachment. Key indicators include: explicit references to "sovereignty", "national interests", "territorial integrity", "veto rights", "consensus principle", "non-interference"; statements that delineate EAEU's economic nature against political integration; references to Kazakhstan's independent foreign policy; invocations of international law principles. Example: "In order to protect our national interests, we must continue to act pragmatically and rationally." (Tokayev, 4th national Qurultai).

The Pragmatic-Economic Framing category captures discourse that justifies EAEU membership through specific functional benefits, performance metrics, and instrumental

calculations. Key indicators include: specific trade turnover and GDP data; references to barrier elimination and market access; connectivity and logistics arguments; industrial cooperation and investment data; cost-benefit language; comparison of EAEU performance against alternatives. Example: “E-commerce, digital document management, automated control and logistics systems have already become integral elements of the economies of the EAEU countries.” (3rd Eurasian Economic Forum, 2025).

A secondary coding layer captured DI-specific dimensions. The Communicative vs. Coordinative orientation dimension coded whether texts were primarily addressed to public audiences (communicative) or to elite/institutional audiences (coordinative, albeit in public form). The Ideational Power Type dimension coded whether specific passages exemplified power through ideas (persuasion and argumentation), power over ideas (exclusion and agenda-setting), or power in ideas (taken-for-granted assumptions) (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016). The Legitimation Register dimension coded whether passages employed cognitive (effectiveness-based) or normative (value-based) legitimation strategies, or a mixture of both. Consistent with discursive institutionalism, cognitive legitimation, so-called causal ideas refer to arguments that justify policies through evidence, logic and material effectiveness, while normative legitimation refers to appeals to values, identity or appropriateness. In practice, I coded any passage as cognitive if it framed EAEU membership in terms of concrete benefits, efficiency or necessity (for example, citing trade figures or economic statistical progress data) and as normative if it framed membership in terms of values, shared destiny or institutional appropriateness (for example, invoking sovereignty or equality of states). These definitions draw on Schmidt’s (2008) argument that cognitive arguments “justify” policies via knowledge and necessity, and normative arguments “legitimate” them via values and

norms. NVivo was then used to calculate the coverage (percentage of text) falling into each register in each period.

The corpus was imported into NVivo 14 (later 15) for systematic coding and query management. Following Rubin's (2021) guidance on focused coding, the analytical procedure proceeded in two phases. In the first phase, open coding was applied to a stratified sample of fifteen texts (five from each period) without reference to the pre-defined framing categories. This inductive pass generated an initial set of preliminary codes, which were subsequently grouped into thematic clusters through axial coding. The clusters that emerged - broadly, "integration identity", "sovereign protection", "economic performance", "institutional reform", and "external connectivity" closely corresponded to the three primary framing categories derived deductively from the DI framework, confirming the theoretical coherence of the coding scheme while also revealing nuances, such as the "external connectivity" cluster, that enriched the pre-defined categories.

In the second, focused coding phase, the refined coding scheme was applied to the full corpus of fifty-five primary texts and the two triangulation documents. Each text was coded at the sentence or clause level for primary framing, secondary framing (where multiple frames coexisted in a single text), DI-specific dimensions (communicative vs. coordinative orientation, ideational power type, legitimation register), and period attribution. Each coding decision was recorded with a brief analytic memo explaining the rationale, enabling retrospective audit of coding choices and transparency for replication.

The triangulation strategy employed in this thesis addresses a fundamental methodological challenge in studying elite discourse in semi-authoritarian contexts: the risk that canonical official discourse (speeches and addresses) represents a carefully managed surface that may not accurately reflect the full range of elite ideational positions. To partially address this limitation, the study

triangulates findings from the primary corpus against two sources of semi-formal administrative elite communication.

Written submissions constitute an additional source of data in this study and were obtained in accordance with the research design and data collection procedures outlined in the study's appendices. Specifically, these materials were collected following the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality as established in the recruitment and consent documentation (see **Error! Reference source not found.**, **Error! Reference source not found.**, **Error! Reference source not found.**).

The written submissions include a response from the Ministry of Trade and Integration dated 10 October 2025 (10:39 a.m.) and a response from a civil servant within the Ministry of National Economy dated 28 August 2025 (14:59). These documents were provided as part of the research process in response to questions derived from the study's data collection instrument, which includes structured interview questions addressing Kazakhstan's participation in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), its perceived benefits and challenges, institutional role, and the relationship between EAEU membership and multi-vector foreign policy.

All materials were collected and handled in line with the ethical guidelines approved by the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee, ensuring that no personally identifiable information is disclosed and that all responses are treated confidentially and used solely for academic research purposes.

The same coding scheme applied to the primary corpus is applied to both triangulation sources, enabling direct comparison. The analytical role of triangulation is threefold. First, convergence between administrative responses and presidential discourse strengthens confidence in

the overall discursive patterns identified. Second, divergence, where administrative responses emphasise elements absent or marginal in presidential discourse, or frame issues differently, is analytically informative in itself, suggesting variation across elite levels that justifies further examination. Third, the administrative responses provide a degree of institutional openness about challenges and constraints that is typically absent from presidential addresses, offering a more complete picture of the discursive construction of EAEU membership.

**Data:**

- Presidential Addresses (2019-2025): Annual State of the Nation speeches (which often include foreign policy sections), inaugural addresses, and keynote speeches by the President that mention the EAEU or regional integration. These speeches are rich communicative discourse, revealing how the head of state presents the EAEU to the nation.
- Speeches at International Forums: Statements delivered by the President or Prime Minister at EAEU Summits (Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meetings), speeches at the United Nations General Assembly, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the Astana International Forum, and similar venues. These are a mix of coordinative (when addressing EAEU peers) and communicative (when addressing an international audience to signal Kazakhstan's stance).
- Parliamentary Speeches and Transcripts: Speeches by the President or key ministers to the Mazhilis (parliament) or at EAEU-related parliamentary hearings, and any discussions in the Senate on ratifying EAEU treaties or addressing related issues. Although Kazakhstan's parliament is not very oppositional, these records can show what points officials choose to emphasize in a formal setting.

- Official Press Releases and Policy Briefings: These from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Trade and Integration, or from the Akorda (President's Office) often accompany state visits or EAEU meetings. They might summarize outcomes of an EAEU summit or explain Kazakhstan's position on a new EAEU policy. They serve as sanitized communicative discourse, carefully wording Kazakhstan's stance.
- Elite responses: responses of the ministries' civil servants via e-mail, e-otinish system. It helps to triangulate the data analysis and gives more evidence towards the research.

All documents gathered in full-text form. Sources included official government websites (Akorda.kz for presidential materials; government.kz; the Eurasian Economic Commission's site for summit communiqués), as well as news agencies (Kazinform, Khabar) for transcripts of speeches and interviews. Where documents were originally in Kazakh or Russian, English translations were obtained - often provided by official sites or, if not available, translated by the researcher with attention to preserving terminology (the term "multi-vector" might appear as жан-жақты саясат in Kazakh or много-векторность in Russian; translations were cross-checked to maintain the concept's integrity in English).

The timeframe for data collection spans from 2019 to 2025, capturing a full decade that begins with the EAEU's establishment and extends to the current year. This period allows comparison between the Nazarbayev era (2015-2018) and the Tokayev era (2019-2025), as well as close examination of the critical year 2022 and its aftermath. Specifically, data were categorized into roughly three phases for initial analysis: 2015-2018 (Nazarbayev, pre-transition), 2019-2021 (early Tokayev, pre-crisis), and 2022-2025 (post-crisis Tokayev). This chronological segmentation helps observe discursive trends and breaks.

## **Limitations and Ethical Considerations**

Limitations: The foremost limitation of this research is its reliance on interpretation of discourse, which can be inherently subjective. Two analysts might read the same speech and emphasize different aspects. To mitigate this, a codebook with clear definitions was used and iteratively refined, as described above, to lend consistency to the analysis. Nevertheless, interpretive subjectivity remains - the findings are, in part, a product of personal reading of the discourse. I address this by being transparent about examples: the thesis provides quotes and context so readers can see evidence for interpretations.

Another limitation is access to true coordinative discourse. Many of the private conversations or internal debates are not publicly accessible. The analysis of coordinative discourse is thus proxied by what is reported or leaked. I partially mitigate this by examining sources like elite interviews or secondary reports that approximate internal views. I rely on triangulation: if multiple sources (speeches, interviews, third-party analyses) all indicate a certain stance, we can be more confident in the interpretation.

There is also the issue of generalizability - as a single-case study of Kazakhstan, how far can insights be extended? The aim of this research is depth; however, by situating findings in Discursive Institutionalism, I hope to illuminate processes (like how discourse shifts in response to crises) that might be applicable in other contexts (other secondary states in alliances). Still, readers should be cautious in directly mapping Kazakhstan's experience onto others without considering differing contexts.

Data limitations deserve note. Because this project required English translations for some materials, there is a risk of losing nuance. I mitigated this by cross-checking critical phrases in the

original language. Moreover, official translations can sometimes be polished or sanitized compared to what was said in Russian, Kazakh. I remained alert to that - for instance, if an official English press release avoided a provocative phrase that was reported in local-language media, I noted the discrepancy and tried to account for it (usually favoring the local language meaning for actual sentiment).

Important limitations of this triangulation strategy must be acknowledged. The e-Otinish and elite responses are still official government documents, generated by civil servants working within the same institutional context as the primary speakers. They are not independent of the dominant discourse and cannot substitute for access to genuinely private elite deliberation. They may reflect approved "talking points" rather than a candid institutional assessment. Their analytical utility lies in the fact that they are generated in a different institutional context, which is a quasi-dialogic format responding to citizen concerns. It may induce greater functional specificity and less rhetorical polish than presidential addresses.

Finally, a brief note on positionality: as researchers analyzing a country's political discourse, I remain conscious of my own biases. I aim to approach discourse neither to applaud nor to criticize its content, but to analyze it. Given that discourse often involves propaganda or strategic messaging, one could ethically worry about either legitimating it by repeating it uncritically, or conversely being too cynical. I handle this by analytically dissecting the discourse - treating it as data - rather than endorsing the viewpoints within it. My goal is understanding, not advocacy. To readers, I present Kazakhstan's elite official narratives and also illuminate their construction, hoping to contribute to a more informed discussion about the country's foreign policy.

## **Justification for Methodological Choices**

Choosing a discourse analytic approach rooted in Discursive Institutionalism is justified by the nature of the research question, which is fundamentally about meaning and narrative. Traditional methods like purely quantitative content analysis or a comparative statistical study of foreign policy would not capture the subtleties of how Kazakhstan's leaders frame their EAEU policy. By contrast, discourse analysis allows us to see the political logic and legitimation process that underlies policy shifts. In post-Soviet contexts, where formal institutions might be less transparent and personalist leadership is strong, a great deal of politics happens through speeches, symbolic gestures, and controlled media messaging. Thus, examining discourse is not just linguistic hand-waving; it is probing one of the primary theaters of politics in Kazakhstan.

Using Discursive Institutionalism (DI) as the guiding theory strengthens the analysis by providing a structured way to link discourse with institutional context. Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy and ambivalence within the EAEU are not just results of material calculations. They are continuously negotiated and justified discursively. DI helps explain how Kazakhstan navigates its regional commitments in times of crisis by adjusting ideas and rhetoric rather than upending formal alignments. For example, rather than exiting the EAEU a formal action when displeased, Kazakhstan might rhetorically reshape its commitment with "we participate on our terms" - DI is tailored to analyze such phenomena.

The methodology also leverages recent scholarship to broaden the analysis: works like Boswell and Hampshire (2017) and Leipold and Winkel (2016) on ideas and agency give insight into how individual actors can drive change even within institutional constraints. This is pertinent when looking at Tokayev's role in shifting tone from Nazarbayev's era, essentially examining how a new agent can alter discourse while operating in the same institutional membership. Similarly,

Simmons and Shaffer's (2023) concept of "border anxiety" is applied because Kazakhstan's situation - balancing between major powers - indeed produces a kind of anxiety that is expressed in discourse (constant assurances of neutrality). Integrating such insights helps ensure that the analysis is not inward-looking on Kazakhstan alone but speaks to wider IR patterns (like how states rhetorically cope with great-power pressures).

In summary, the combination of qualitative discourse analysis, process tracing of discursive changes, and a DI framework is methodologically coherent and appropriate for uncovering the answers to the research questions. It aligns with the data type (speeches, texts) and the theoretical premise (ideas and discourse drive change), and it addresses the challenge of studying an evolving foreign policy in an authoritarian context by focusing on what that regime itself says. The next chapters will deploy this methodology to detail the findings - showing how Kazakhstan's EAEU discourse evolved, and interpreting those changes through the lens of coordinative vs communicative discourse, ideational power, and legitimation strategies.

The following chapter will present the empirical analysis, structured around key periods and themes identified, followed by a concluding chapter that ties together the theoretical implications and answers the research questions based on the evidence gathered.

## Empirical puzzle and the Discursive Institutionalism lens

### **Baseline discursive grammar before 2022: EAEU as economic priority, but sovereignty-protected**

Neo-Eurasianism, according to Anceschi (2020), was used by Nazarbaev to help both ground ideology and build his regime in Kazakhstan's foreign policy, framing the country in the context of geopolitical Eurasia and constructing a rationale for both why the country matters and

why it must be ruled by Nazarbaev. The modus operandi of the Eurasian Union had been crucial for the “authoritarian” regimes to conduct their policies through the prism of external affairs, while multi-vector policy is described as a mere postscript in Kazakhstan’s neo-Eurasianist endeavours.

With Tokayev assuming the presidency in March 2019, his discourse marks a shift in emphasis rather than a rupture with this earlier ideational framework. The baseline texture of new presidential discourse, visible already in 2019-2021, is not a romantic integrationism but a pragmatic, tightly bounded affirmation. The key is that integration is articulated as acceptable only when it is (1) economic in purpose, (2) treaty-anchored in form and (3) non-hierarchical in implied authority relations. This “grammar” is not merely repeated, it becomes an institutionalized discursive template, an example of power in ideas, since it structures what can be said about the EAEU without triggering domestic vulnerability.

This discursive template is further evident in how President Tokayev situates the EAEU within a broader Eurasian institutional ecosystem. In the 2019 SCO heads-of-state discourse, the EAEU is mentioned alongside ASEAN, BRICS, and the European Union as potential “reliable partners” of the SCO: “the Eurasian Economic Union, as well as ASEAN, BRICS and the European Union can act as reliable partners of the SCO” (Tokayev, 2019). This formulation accomplishes two discursive moves at once. First, it de-exceptionalizes the EAEU—placing it among multiple institutional formats rather than as a unique civilizational project. Second, it sets up a multi-vector logic already at the level of regional institutional talk: the EAEU is not framed as an exclusive alignment but as one node in a network.

NVivo coding output quantifies this multi-institutional placement: in the 2019 SCO expanded-format speech, the node “CICA or other int orgs” captures 8 references (8.33% coverage)

and “Discursive Balancing (Multi-vectorism)” 5 references (5.49% coverage), whereas “EAEU” registers 1 reference (0.88% coverage). The same speech also contains “Legal-Normative Internationalism” (3 references, 2.98% coverage), alongside smaller traces of “Normative Eurasianism” (1 reference, 1.73% coverage) and “Sovereignty Assertion” (1 reference, 1.15% coverage). Quantitatively, this distribution supports reading the EAEU here primarily as one institutional vector within a broader Eurasian ecosystem rather than as a singular, identity-anchored project.

From 2020 onwards, when the EAEU becomes the immediate institutional setting (Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meeting), the discourse becomes simultaneously more technical and more defensive about sovereignty. The 2020 council meeting corpus is particularly revealing because it contains the strongest sovereignty-protection language inside an explicitly “EAEU” setting. The excerpt “the strategy will limit the sovereign rights of governments and parliaments” (Tokayev during the meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2020) is a direct sovereignty assertion that invokes not only executive institutions but also parliaments as legitimate holders of national competence. In an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian setting where parliamentary autonomy is limited, the rhetorical inclusion of “parliaments” is itself meaningful: it extends the sovereignty claim beyond the presidency, implying that supranational overreach would violate a wider national institutional order.

In 2020, the balance between integration talk and boundary-setting is similarly measurable across the domestic and EAEU-facing venues. In the 2020 State of the Nation Address, “Discursive Balancing (Multi-vectorism)” is coded in 4 references (0.90% coverage), compared with 2 references for “EAEU” (0.49% coverage) and 2 references for “Sovereignty Assertion” (0.32% coverage). In the 2020 Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meeting text, NVivo registers both

“EAEU” (1 reference, 1.21% coverage) and “Sovereignty Assertion” (1 reference, 0.80% coverage), quantifying the co-presence of integrationist language and competence-protection within the Union’s core institutional arena.

In DI terms, this is philosophical ideation (sovereignty as a core principle), communicated in a hybrid arena: it is spoken within an elite coordinative-consideration context but also performs outward reassurance (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016). It also performs a form of power over ideas. By representing the “strategy” as a threat to sovereign rights, the discourse attempts to delegitimize a particular trajectory of integration (deepening via strategy-based supranational empowerment) and thus to narrow what counts as acceptable EAEU development.

This boundary-setting is reinforced through legal-normative anchoring. The statement “it will contradict the essence of the Treaty on the Establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union of 2015” (Tokayev during the meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2020) translates a sovereignty concern into an institutional-legal argument. In DI terms, this is not merely referencing law-it is using law as ideational infrastructure to stabilize a meaning: the EAEU treaty is invoked as a constraining device against “overexpansion of integration”. Here, legal-normative internationalism functions as a legitimating framework that appears neutral and rule-based, yet in practice it strategically protects national competence.

At the same time, the discourse clearly affirms the Union as a priority economic mechanism. The 2020 council meeting includes one of the strongest positive lines: “we view cooperation within the Eurasian Economic Union as a priority direction and a key element of economic recovery” (Tokayev during the meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2020). This is integrationist framing coupled with economic justification. The phrase “key element

of economic recovery” positions the EAEU as instrumentally necessary, especially in crisis governance contexts. Yet even this affirmation is embedded within the same speech environment that cautions against expanding supranational powers (“we should carefully approach the issues of expanding the powers of the Eurasian Economic Commission” (Tokayev during the meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2020). The attitude here is best described as conditional: pro-EAEU as recovery infrastructure, but anti-unbounded integration.

This conditionality is also framed as a legitimacy requirement. The 2020 excerpt "A fundamental issue is the trust of governments, parliaments, and, most importantly, societies" (Tokayev during the meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2020) effectively brings communicative legitimacy into the EAEU arena. It signals that integration can not be sustained without societal resonance. In DI terms, this is an explicit recognition that communicative discourse matters for institutional stability: the EAEU’s endurance depends not only on elite consensus but also on public legitimation.

In 2021, the tone becomes more openly integrationist and performance-oriented, relying on legitimation through measurable economic results. For example, “Kazakhstan's trade turnover with the countries of the Europe...” (Tokayev during the meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2021) is coded as cognitive legitimation via economic gains. Another excerpt emphasizes that integration must translate into tangible social experience: "Kazakhstan is sincerely and specifically interested in the development of integration" (Tokayev during the meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2021). This is a noteworthy discursive shift in emphasis. The “fruits” language indicates that the union’s legitimacy is increasingly tied to everyday economic outcomes rather than to abstract narratives of Eurasian unity. That is, the discourse is nudging the

locus of legitimation from philosophical/normative to pragmatic/cognitive, especially in public-facing formulations.

Yet, crucially, 2021 does not abandon boundary-setting, but it repositions it. Balance and treaty-boundedness remain invoked ("treaty-like integration logic invoked functionally", "balance, not deepening for its own sake" as summarized in the dataset notes for 2021 segments). Therefore, before 2022, Kazakhstan's attitude toward the EAEU is characterized by a stable discursive compromise: assert membership's economic usefulness while continually disciplining integration through sovereignty and legal limits. This compromise is precisely the kind of discursive institutional equilibrium DI expects in contexts where formal institutional exit is costly and where elites must manage multiple audiences.

If we treat the baseline presidential State of the Nation addresses (2019-2021) as the main arena of domestic communicative discourse, NVivo coding shows that "Sovereignty Assertion" appears 10 times across these three texts (0.69% coverage in 2019; 0.32% in 2020; 1.22% in 2021). By contrast, "EAEU" appears in the 2020 and 2021 addresses with a combined 3 references (0.49% and 0.15% coverage respectively). "Discursive Balancing (Multi-vectorism)" is also persistent in each baseline address (2 references, 0.34% in 2019; 4 references, 0.90% in 2020; 3 references, 0.74% in 2021), which indicates that multi-vector framing is not merely a post-2022 rhetorical adjustment but a stable component of baseline discourse.

Overall, in the baseline period (2019-21), the presidential discourse remained predominantly integrationist within a multi-vector framework, with sovereignty as an underlying constraint. NVivo coding indicates that the Integration frame had the largest share of discourse in this period (making it the dominant frame), although Sovereignty framing was also prominent as a normative

anchor. In terms of legitimation registers, most appeals were normative: for example, Tokayev frequently justified EAEU membership by invoking Kazakhstan's Eurasian identity and equal status (normative legitimation), while economic arguments (cognitive legitimation) appeared only occasionally. In other words, baseline rhetoric continued the Nazarbayev-era emphasis on shared values and stability, even as it began to reference practical benefits. This pattern supports the argument that there was no abrupt reversal in policy: the discourse was largely a continuation, with normative integration as the baseline and only minor moves toward pragmatic justification.

### **The 2022 inflection: crisis context, sovereignty reactivation, and pragmatic “economy-first” consolidation**

The year 2022 is best read as a discursive turning point, not because Kazakhstan's President announce a formal policy rupture with the EAEU, but because they intensify the justificatory and boundary-setting work needed to stabilize membership under shock conditions. In the corpus, 2022 is saturated with crisis framing and sovereignty-relevant language in general political discourse, and this bleeds into EAEU discourse as a stronger insistence on pragmatism, procedural caution, and the non-teleological nature of integration - meaning that integration is not presented as a linear progression toward deeper political unity, but as a conditional and functionally bounded process.

One strand of 2022 discourse situates EAEU-related economic coordination as a sovereignty-supporting device. At the Eurasian Economic Forum, President Tokayev's discourse frames Greater Eurasia as a plural institutional space: "Greater Eurasia is a large civilizational project, and the main... a common space of equal cooperation for regional organizations" (Tokayev during the meeting of EEF, 2022). Even though the phrase "civilizational project" appears, suggesting an elevated normative register, the key content is equal cooperation among

organizations. This is not a call for hegemonic consolidation but an institutional pluralism narrative. The philosophical idea is thus equality-in-plurality, which is compatible with multi-vectorism.

The second Eurasian Economic Forum excerpt makes the sovereignty link explicit in functional economic terms: "the importance of forming an integrated currency market of the EAEU to ensure sovereignty and stabilise the economy" (Tokayev during the meeting of EEF, 2022). This is an important discursive reconfiguration. Sovereignty is not only self-asserted as a principle, it is framed as requiring new forms of internal market-building (financial integration) within the EAEU. In DI terms, this is ideational innovation: sovereignty is re-coded from a "limit" on integration to a "reason" for selective integration. It is also a clear example of cognitive legitimation (stabilize the economy) intertwined with normative anchoring (ensure sovereignty). By presenting financial integration as sovereignty-enhancing, the discourse attempts to neutralize the common anti-integration critique that deeper integration necessarily erodes autonomy.

Within the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council setting in 2022, the discourse performs a different but complementary move: it asserts that integration must be governed by cautious pragmatism rather than deadline-driven supranational projects. The statement "Pragmatism and detailed elaboration of each step should prevail over the desire to meet the planned deadlines" (Tokayev during the meeting of Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2022) is a policy/programmatic idea about governance style. It suggests that in a crisis environment, hurried integration can be costly and thus illegitimate. This is also a subtle correction of institutional tempo: it implies that pushing timelines (possibly by larger members or the Commission) is not acceptable if it bypasses deliberation.

The sovereignty boundary is articulated even more directly: "there is no need to prepare a new strategy for the development of the Eurasian Economic Union yet, and moreover, there is no need to limit the rights of national governments" (Tokayev during the meeting of Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2021). Here, we see discursive gatekeeping (power over ideas) again: it rejects producing a "new strategy" that might be read as a vehicle for deeper supranational mandate. The repetition "no need... no need..." is performative. It actively forecloses a discursive path. The phrase "limit the rights of national governments" further reinforces sovereignty as institutional competence.

At the same time, President Tokayev's discourse continues to legitimate the EAEU's institutional architecture by describing a "delicate balance" of competences: "The institutional and substantive part of the treaty ensures a delicate balance of national and supranational competences" (Tokayev during the meeting of Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2022). This sentence performs a stabilizing function: it reassures that the treaty already sets proper boundaries. This is a philosophical idea (balance of authority) that protects the institutional legitimacy of membership even while resisting specific deepening initiatives.

To interpret 2022 discursively, it is important to note that the broader political discourse in Kazakhstan is heavily sovereignty-charged in this period. In the State of the Nation Address, sovereignty and territorial integrity are explicitly foregrounded: "we need to firmly adhere to the strategic course aimed at protecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state" (Tokayev, 2022). Even though this is not an EAEU statement, it matters for DI analysis because it establishes the domestic legitimacy environment in which EAEU discourse must operate. When sovereignty becomes a key publicly articulated anchor in domestic communicative discourse, EAEU messaging

must be recalibrated to avoid appearing as surrendering autonomy. Thus, 2022 produces not an anti-EAEU turn, but a heightened need for sovereignty-compatible legitimation.

NVivo outputs also quantify how 2022's hinge operates across arenas. In the 2022 State-of-the-Nation Address, "Sovereignty Assertion" is coded in 10 references (2.32% coverage), indicating that sovereignty becomes more saturated in domestic communicative discourse. In parallel, the EAEU institutional-setting text becomes denser: in the 2022 Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meeting, the "EAEU" node registers 3 references (3.68% coverage), accompanied by a sizeable "Discursive Balancing (Multi-vectorism)" footprint (2 references, 5.30% coverage). This pattern is consistent with the reaffirmation of economic coordination under intensified boundary demarcation.

To sum up, the 2022 discursive inflection is characterized by three shifts: (1) sovereignty is reactivated as an explicit legitimating anchor; (2) integration is narrated as strictly non-teleological, stepwise, and pragmatic; (3) selective deeper integration (financial market building) is reframed as potentially sovereignty-enhancing rather than sovereignty-eroding. This combination is precisely what DI would expect in a "stress test" environment where institutional membership remains constant but its meaning must be renegotiated.

### **From 2023 to 2024: outward connectivity, sanctions-era pragmatism, and institutional discipline inside the Union**

If 2022 is the hinge, 2023-2024 is the period of consolidation in which President Tokayev's EAEU discourse becomes more outward-looking and connectivity-oriented. The key transformation

is not that Kazakhstan suddenly celebrates integration more. Rather, it increasingly defines the value of EAEU membership through externalization: third-country ties, transport corridors, digital alignment with non-EAEU projects, and Global South engagement. This discursive move is especially important because it subtly weakens any interpretation of the EAEU as primarily a Russia-centered vector. The EAEU becomes a platform to talk about diversification, rather than a symbol of alignment.

In the 2023 Supreme Eurasian Economic Council discourse, crisis language remains explicit: "this year was difficult, primarily due to the ongoing and increasing global instability. Inflationary pressure, the transformation of international logistics, regional conflicts, and sanctions confrontations" (Tokayev during the meeting of Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2023). Here, instability and sanctions are not framed as reasons to retreat from integration. Instead, they are used to justify more functional cooperation and adaptation. This is stability/security justification deployed in an economic-institutional setting, linking geopolitics to integration utility.

A particularly important doctrinal line in 2023 is the explicit claim of authorship over the EAEU's "economic component": "Kazakhstan initially advocated for the principle of the economic component of the Union" (Tokayev during the meeting of Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2023). This statement is doing historical and institutional work. It re-centers Kazakhstan as a foundational norm entrepreneur, not in terms of "Eurasianism" as ideology, but in terms of a programmatic boundary: the Union should remain economic. In DI terms, it is a programmatic idea presented as institutional identity, which helps legitimize ongoing boundary-setting as continuity rather than deviation.

The 2023 discourse also integrates the EAEU into a broader connectivity paradigm closely associated with China's infrastructure initiatives. A key excerpt links EAEU development to a declaration associated with "China's global One Belt, One Road initiative" (Tokayev during the meeting of Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2023). Another passage aligns "the digital agenda with China's Digital Silk Road initiative" and speaks of a "communication line along the route Russia - Kazakhstan - Iran" (Tokayev during the meeting of Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2023). This is discursive balancing (multi-vectorism) institutionalized inside EAEU talk. Kazakhstan is not describing China-related connectivity as an alternative to the EAEU. It is narrating the EAEU as a participant in a larger Eurasian (and global) connectivity architecture. This rearticulation serves Kazakhstan's autonomy: it multiplies vectors while keeping EAEU membership.

The outward connectivity framing in 2023 is also visible in coding density within the 2023 Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meeting text: NVivo captures "Discursive Balancing (Multi-vectorism)" in 3 references (12.00% coverage) together with "EAEU" (2 references, 7.24% coverage) and "Sovereignty Assertion" (1 reference, 3.58% coverage). This distribution quantifies a discursive layering in which high-salience EAEU talk is systematically accompanied by balancing and sovereignty-coded registers rather than by an autonomous integrationist narrative.

Moreover, the EAEU is explicitly framed as embedded in broader external economic relations: "it is important to consistently strengthen the potential of the EAEU in the external circuit, developing trade and economic relations with third countries and integration associations" (Tokayev during the meeting of Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2023). This sentence is crucial for attitude change because it shifts the implied purpose of the EAEU: from an internal

market project to an external platform project. In DI terms, this is a programmatic realignment in the meaning of integration-membership is justified through external reach.

The year 2024 intensifies this connectivity and external-market logic but also adds a strong institutional discipline component. On the one hand, Kazakhstan uses trade figures as cognitive legitimation: "Kazakhstan's trade turnover with the member countries of ... reaching 28.5 billion dollars, and exports have more than doubled" (Tokayev during the meeting of Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2024). This is a classic cognitive argument: integration yields measurable benefits. It is also communicatively useful because numbers can be politically deployed to quiet skepticism, turning the EAEU into a performance story.

On the other hand, 2024 includes unusually sharp critique of internal restrictions and ad hoc governance inside the Union. The excerpt "It is important to completely eliminate the practice of applying hidden restrictions, so-called point solutions, and any kind of manual control" (Tokayev during the meeting of Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2024), is coded as sovereignty assertion and power over ideas. Here, "manual control" is a delegitimizing label: it implies arbitrary, politically driven measures that contradict the promised rules-based character of economic integration. The critique targets the mode of governance inside the EAEU, not membership itself. In DI terms, this is internal contestation through discourse: Kazakhstan signals dissatisfaction while remaining within the institutional frame, attempting to reshape acceptable practices.

This discipline narrative is paired with reasserting foundational principles of economic union. The 2024 excerpt emphasizes "the freedom of movement of goods" as a foundational principle requiring "full implementation" (Tokayev during the meeting of Supreme Eurasian

Economic Council, 2023; Tokayev during the meeting of Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2024). This is legal-normative internationalism applied internally: it invokes the EAEU's own normative-legal promises as a constraint on member behavior (and perhaps on informal power play). It is a strategic use of law-like language to push against protectionism and exceptions.

For 2024, the council-meeting arena continues to contain sovereignty and balancing signals even as the discourse becomes more disciplinary. In the 2024 Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meeting text, NVivo captures "Discursive Balancing (Multi-vectorism)" in 3 references (5.11% coverage) and "Sovereignty Assertion" in 1 reference (1.44% coverage). Quantitatively, this shows that competence-protection and external-balancing remain present inside the Union's highest-level institutional venue, even when the surface register is one of internal market discipline.

Most revealingly, 2024's definition of integration is explicitly functional and non-ideological: "A high level of integration interaction underlies major infrastructure projects, the development of industrial cooperation, and the formation of a common market of services" (Tokayev during the meeting of Supreme Eurasian Economic Council", 2024). The meaning of integration is operational (markets, services), not metaphysical.

This functionalism culminates in a direct reframing of integration as connectivity: "A basic condition for establishing long-term integration remains the presence of a sustainable system of connectivity with external markets" (Tokayev during the meeting of Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2024). This is perhaps the clearest discursive shift in the period: integration is no longer primarily internal harmonization, it is sustained connectivity outward. The EAEU is re-legitimated as a mechanism for connecting to "external markets," including the Global South (as indicated in

segment 11's framing of prospects with rapidly developing regions and particular interest in the Global South).

Finally, Kazakhstan ends the 2024 council discourse with a formula that combines affirmation with boundary-setting: "Kazakhstan will support economic integration based on the principles of equality and mutually beneficial partnership" (Tokayev during the meeting of Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 2024). The words "equality" and "mutually beneficial" are not decorative; they are sovereignty-compatible constraints embedded into the legitimation statement. This is a mature DI pattern: communicative affirmation coupled with built-in conditionality.

Thus, 2023-2024 show an attitude shift that is best described as strategic appropriation of the EAEU. Kazakhstan increasingly talks as if the EAEU is valuable insofar as it helps Kazakhstan diversify and modernize (corridors, digital agenda, Global South engagement), while simultaneously insisting the Union must behave as a rules-based economic arrangement rather than as an instrument of discretionary control. President Tokayev increasingly justified the EAEU with concrete, performance-oriented language, a rise in cognitive legitimation, while normative appeals continued only as background qualifiers. For example, in 2023 speeches he highlighted the EAEU's benefits for trade, infrastructure and technology (cognitive legitimation), and spoke in terms of efficiency and modernization. Sovereignty references still appeared but mainly to reaffirm that integration would not undermine national control. In short, the president's rhetoric now foregrounded outcomes and functional logic, which is precisely the cognitive register, while treating sovereignty as a constant boundary. This change from normative integration-talk to pragmatic economic-talk aligns with the thesis that Kazakhstan's discourse became more oriented toward practical justifications in response to external pressures.

## **The 2025 discourse: pragmatism and digital sovereignty as a new boundary**

By 2025, President Tokayev's EAEU discourse in the Eurasian Economic Forum excerpts is distilled into a set of doctrinal formulas that combine (a) explicit non-teleological integration logic, (b) economic pragmatism, (c) digital modernization, and (d) a sharpened sovereignty concern manifested as "digital sovereignty". This is significant because it shows how sovereignty re-enters discourse not only as territorial/legal competence but as technological dependence and vulnerability to global monopolies.

The 2025 Eurasian Economic Forum excerpt "the further development of the EAEU should be based on the principles of equality, mutual benefit and pragmatism, serving the interests of the economies of our states" (Tokayev during the EEF, 2025) is a concentrated programmatic statement. It contains an explicit equality clause and a pragmatic criterion ("serving the interests") that defines legitimacy instrumentally. Importantly, it also implies a rejection of hierarchy: "equality" and "mutual respect" function as anti-hegemonic markers. In DI terms, this is a philosophical anchor (equality among states) that structures the communicative justification of continued membership.

The next excerpt makes the non-teleological logic explicit: "Integration in itself does not bring the desired results, since it is the result of joint work to find mutually acceptable compromises" ("Tokayev during the EEF, 2025"). This is discursive gatekeeping (power over ideas). It rejects integration-as-a-value and replaces it with integration-as-a-process contingent on negotiation and compromise. The "mutually acceptable" phrasing is an institutional weapon in

polite language: it implies that if compromise is not acceptable to Kazakhstan, integration should not proceed. This is how contestation is expressed within membership.

At the same time, Kazakhstan presents a future-oriented legitimization via digital functionality: "E-commerce, digital document management, automated control and logistics systems have already become integral elements of the economies of the EAEU countries" (Tokayev during the EEF, 2025). The EAEU is narrated as a modernization platform. Digitalization here functions as a policy idea domain where integration is legitimate because it produces efficiency and competitiveness.

However, the most interesting shift is the articulation of risk and sovereignty in digital terms: "These are risks such as inequality in access to technology, reduction of traditional jobs, limitation of digital sovereignty, including dependence on global digital monopolies" (Tokayev during the EEF, 2025). This is a clear extension of sovereignty assertion into a new field: sovereignty is threatened not only by supranational institutions but by global technological structures and monopolistic platforms. This is a notable ideational adaptation. President Tokayev's discourse is effectively telling a story where selective integration (digital tools) must be balanced against dependence on external digital monopolies. In DI terms, this expands the set of "institutional contexts" shaping discourse: the global digital economy becomes part of the meaning context of EAEU politics.

Finally, the 2025 EEF excerpt "Kazakhstan is open to cooperation and invites the EAEU countries to jointly participate in the launch of innovative clusters, technology parks and startup incubators" (Tokayev, 2025) positions Kazakhstan as a hub and agenda-setter for innovation. The invitation to EAEU partners is communicatively cooperative, yet it also implies a preferred

integration pathway: innovation-building rather than political deepening, and project-based functionalism rather than supranational delegation. This aligns with the architecture visible in 2023-2024 connectivity talk but updates it to the “innovation economy” discourse.

Overall, the 2025 discursive stance is again not anti-EAEU. It is pro-participation but increasingly explicit about the conditions under which participation remains legitimate: pragmatic benefits, negotiated compromises, and protection against new forms of dependency (digital sovereignty). This is a sophisticated discursive institutional strategy: shift the battlefield from "exit vs loyalty" to "meaning and scope of integration".

The domestic communicative discourse in 2025 exhibits a similar hierarchy of legitimation registers. In the 2025 State of the Union, NVivo coding extracts 6 references for “Sovereignty Assertion” (0.58% coverage) and 6 references for “Discursive Balancing (Multi-vectorism)” (0.45% coverage), whereas “EAEU” appears in 2 references (0.19% coverage). The same address also contains smaller traces of “CICA or other int. orgs” (1 reference, 0.08% coverage) and “Legal-Normative Internationalism” (1 reference, 0.06% coverage), indicating that EAEU talk is present but subordinated within a broader sovereignty- and multi-vector-centred domestic framing. The trend towards pragmatism continued in 2025. NVivo data indicate that the Pragmatic-Economic frame remained dominant. President Tokayev’s addresses featured predominantly cognitive legitimation: he cited digital development and economic competitiveness as reasons for remaining in the EAEU. For example, speeches spoke of “efficiency and competitiveness” as the basis for legitimacy (cognitive language), and described technological cooperation in instrumental terms. Normative legitimation occurred mainly in references to “smart sovereignty” or conditional participation, but these were comparatively rare.

## **Discursive institutional dynamics: communicative vs coordinative discourse and ideational power**

A DI reading requires not only mapping "what is said" (discursive content) but also how discourse functions institutionally-what it enables, constrains, and legitimizes. Communicative discourse as strategic legitimation across the corpus, communicative discourse performs stabilization work on at least three levels:

Domestic reassurance: Sovereignty assertions are often voiced in ways that pre-empt domestic skepticism. The 2020 and 2022 EAEU council excerpts explicitly reference parliaments and rights of national governments, which suggests that domestic legitimacy is invoked as a constraint on integration. Even when delivered in an EAEU meeting context, these lines are clearly usable domestically, especially in a post-2022 environment where sovereignty is a salient public anchor. NVivo coding shows that in the State of the Nation addresses, the "Sovereignty Assertion" node moves from 0.69% coverage (2019) to 1.22% (2021), and remains high at 1.65% coverage in the 2022 State-of-the-Nation Address, empirically grounding sovereignty as a salient public anchor rather than a merely implicit background assumption.

International signaling without rupture: The repeated calls for "equality" and "mutual respect" are indirect signals aimed at other EAEU members, particularly in an asymmetrical power environment. They express contestation in a form that does not openly accuse any actor but still clarifies Kazakhstan's red lines.

Pragmatic legitimation is visible in the use of trade turnover figures and GDP-related indicators (2024 segment 2; 2021 segments on trade turnover) where the elites justify continued participation by narrating measurable outcomes. This is particularly important in a context where ideological legitimation of Eurasianism is weak or contested.

DI suggests that communicative discourse is not secondary, it is a site where agency is exercised. In this corpus, Kazakhstan's elites use public discourse to repackage institutional constraints as national choices. For example, "pragmatism" is presented not as forced adaptation but as a principle that should guide the Union's development.

### **Inferred coordinative discourse: limits of observation and indirect traces**

The category of "Coordinative Discourse (Inferred)" in this study must be treated with methodological caution. Direct access to coordinative discourse among Kazakhstan's policy elites is limited, as no official minutes, transcripts of closed deliberations, or internal policy documents are publicly available for the period under study. As a result, the analysis does not claim to directly reconstruct internal elite debates or decision-making processes. Instead, it identifies only indirect traces of potential coordination dynamics as they appear within publicly available communicative discourse.

Such traces are observable in selected passages from EAEU council meetings, where Kazakhstan's representatives articulate positions on issues such as the expansion of Eurasian Economic Commission powers or the development of Union-level strategies. For example, the statement that "we should carefully approach the issues of expanding the powers of the Eurasian Economic Commission" (2020 Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meeting, segment 10)

suggests that questions of institutional competence and authority were under discussion. However, rather than providing direct evidence of internal negotiation, such statements are interpreted as public-facing signals that may reflect underlying concerns about institutional balance.

Similarly, references to the need to eliminate “manual control” practices (2024 Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meeting, segment 9) highlight tensions in governance within the Union. Yet, these should not be read as definitive evidence of coordinative disputes, but rather as communicative formulations that hint at institutional frictions without explicitly revealing the structure or content of internal deliberations.

Accordingly, in this thesis, coordinative discourse is not analysed as a fully observable domain but as a limited and indirect category. The empirical analysis remains grounded primarily in communicative discourse, with inferred coordinative elements used cautiously to indicate possible areas of institutional contestation. Future research, particularly with access to meeting minutes or internal documentation, may provide a more direct reconstruction of coordinative discourse within the EAEU.

In Discursive Institutionalism terms, this suggests that institutional contestation in the Kazakhstan–EAEU context is most clearly visible at the level of communicative discourse, where boundaries of acceptable integration are articulated publicly, while the internal coordinative processes through which these positions are negotiated remain largely inaccessible.

### **Triangulation**

The Ministry of Trade and Integration's formal written response provides an extensive account of Kazakhstan's EAEU participation across five thematic areas: benefits and challenges, Kazakhstan's current role, key objectives and priorities, difficulties and limitations, and the relationship between multi-vector foreign policy and EAEU obligations. The document was

generated in October 2025 in response to a specific citizen inquiry, creating a discursive context different from presidential address-making: the ministry is accountable for providing accurate information and must address the petitioner's specific concerns rather than managing a public image.

Several features of this document are analytically significant for triangulation purposes. The document's framing of EAEU benefits is overwhelmingly pragmatic-economic, consistent with the dominant framing identified in the third-period primary corpus. The ministry's account leads with specific trade turnover data - 87.1% growth since the EAEU's founding, from \$16.3 billion in 2015 to \$30.5 billion in 2024, and systematically enumerates institutional mechanisms: barrier elimination, the "Work Without Borders" unified employment system, mutual recognition of educational certificates, and equalised access to natural monopoly infrastructure. This enumeration reflects the cognitive legitimation register that has become dominant in the primary discourse: the EAEU is justified through measurable functional outputs.

The document's treatment of challenges and limitations is particularly notable because this section is less frequently foregrounded in presidential discourse. The ministry acknowledges that 70 barriers have been formally identified within the EAEU framework, of which 69 have been eliminated, with 27 attributed to Russia, 16 to Kazakhstan, and the remainder to other members. Kazakhstan submitted 7 formal complaints to the Eurasian Economic Commission in the first 9 months of 2025 alone, covering transport policy, customs regulation, non-tariff regulation, and industrial policy. This level of specificity about ongoing institutional disputes reveals an institutional reality that is consistent with the sovereignty and reform-advocacy framing identified in the primary corpus: Kazakhstan is an active, assertive participant in EAEU institutional processes, not a passive recipient of integration.

The section on multi-vector foreign policy and EAEU obligations is particularly significant for the thesis's central argument. The ministry explicitly states that "multi-vectorism and Kazakhstan's participation in the EAEU do not contradict but mutually complement each other". The statement operationalises this complementarity by describing EAEU mechanisms that protect Kazakhstan's ability to pursue independent foreign policy: consensus decision-making, veto rights over decisions affecting national economic interests, and the explicit restriction of EAEU competence to economic matters. Crucially, the document states directly that "any initiatives by parties that go beyond economic integration are blocked by the Kazakhstani side", a remarkably candid statement of active institutional gatekeeping that corroborates the 'power over ideas' dynamic identified in the primary discourse analysis.

### **Civil Servant's Response**

The second triangulation source is a civil servant's from the Ministry of National Economy framing of Kazakhstan's positioning within the EAEU, SCO, and Belt and Road Initiative that provides insight into the discursive logic operating at a working-level policy level. The document explains Kazakhstan's integration strategy as a single coherent logic expressed through three complementary platforms: "EAEU - internal integration and barrier removal; SCO - security and regional coordination; BRI - global routes and investment. Together, this adds up to a strategy of making Kazakhstan the central transit hub of Eurasia."

This framing is analytically significant in several respects. First, it explicitly subordinates the EAEU to a broader strategic logic - the "central transit hub" vision rather than treating EAEU membership as self-justifying. This is consistent with the connectivity-hub narrative identified in the third-period primary corpus, confirming that this frame is not merely presidential rhetoric but

reflects a working-level institutional understanding of Kazakhstan's strategy. Second, the hierarchical ordering of the three platforms with the EAEU described as handling "internal" matters, the SCO "regional coordination", and BRI "global routes" positions the EAEU as the most proximate but also the most technically constrained of Kazakhstan's integration platforms. This functional differentiation exercises power in ideas by normalising the EAEU's limitation to an "internal market fine-tuning" role and implicitly delegating broader strategic functions to platforms less dominated by Russia.

Third, the document's language about the EAEU - "fine-tuning the internal market", "eliminating barriers", "improving transport efficiency", "creating comfortable conditions for business" reflects a thoroughgoing pragmatic-economic framing that does not invoke integration identity, Eurasianist values, or historical community. The EAEU, in this working-level account, is fundamentally a business facilitation mechanism which is important, but instrumentally. This reinforces the finding that the shift from integrationist to pragmatic-economic dominant framing identified in the primary corpus is not confined to the presidential level but reflects a broader institutional understanding.

## Appendix A

### List of Codes

Name	Description
Discursive Form	
Communicative Discourse	Public-facing discourse legitimising or framing EAEU policy
Coordinative Discourse (Inferred)	Signals of elite coordination inferred from the responses (int)

Name	Description
Discursive Strategy	
Internal Contestation Framing	Subtle renegotiation without exit, especially in Maslihat Forum
Norm-Based Legitimation	Justification via values or identity
Power In Ideas	Unquestioned background assumptions
Power Over Ideas	Marginalisation of alternative views
Power Through Ideas	Persuasion via framing and reasoning
Pragmatic Legitimation	Justification via concrete benefits
Ideational Content	
Crisis as Discursive Stress Test	Crisis framed as narrative adjustment moment
Discursive Balancing (Multi-vectorism)	Balancing EAEU with other partnerships
Fall of multivectorism	
External Pressure or Information Threats	Foreign actors framed as destabilising
Integrationist Framing	EAEU framed as beneficial or necessary
CICA or other int orgs	
EAEU	
Legal-Normative Internationalism	Legitimation via international law
Normative Eurasianism	Appeals to shared Eurasian identity
Sovereignty Assertion	Emphasis on autonomy and independent decision-making

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