The Challenges of Implementing the EAEU's Digital Agenda^{1, 2}

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Abstract

Digitalization is one of the dominant processes in contemporary economic development, both on the national level and globally. The process of articulating and implementing digital economy policies is underway in the member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and in 2017 the EAEU's Strategic Directions for the Development of the Digital Agenda Until 2025 was adopted. Identifying the specificities and challenges of the digital agenda's implementation in the context of integration processes in the region is the aim of this article. The study focuses on the interaction at the supranational level of decision-making within EAEU institutions, as well as the interaction of the national and supranational levels. The author concludes that the projects and initiatives are being implemented as a part of the agenda, albeit slowly. The other envisaged mechanisms require a much higher level of harmonization, for which EAEU leaders are not yet ready. The main features of the digital agenda's implementation in the EAEU are the primacy of sovereignty, diverging levels of digitalization of members in both access to infrastructure and regulatory frameworks, project-based approaches to implementation, absence of a digital agenda in the Treaty on the EAEU and involvement of expert communities.

Based on analysis of the legal and regulatory framework, the following recommendations can be made: an institutional and legal framework for the digital agenda should be established, coordination between the national and supranational levels should be improved, digital strategies should be adopted and synchronized in all member states, the selection and implementation of initiatives should be improved, best practices should be adopted, and cooperation with international organizations and the European Union (EU) should be developed.

For Russia, the development of a digital agenda within the EAEU and deepened integration (or development of cooperation) are necessary to ensure the realization of national interests in a priority region – the post-Soviet space – especially given the increasingly active developing regulatory influence of other actors, primarily the EU. Given the growing importance of digitalization as a driver of economic growth and the increasing competition for influence on the regulation of the digital economy, a priority for the Russian Federation should be to resolve the contradiction between the principle of primacy of sovereignty and the development of integration. A possible way out could be an approach based on “multi-speed integration,” as tested in the EU. Another option could be a complete revision of the model of interaction with neighbours in the region.

Key words: EAEU; EAEU digital agenda until 2025; integration processes in the post-Soviet space; Eurasian Economic Commission; digital economy

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Introduction

Digitalization is one of the key systemic processes defining the development of the global economy. National authorities implement various digital strategies and programmes to raise their competitiveness and ensure the well-being of their citizens, while international organizations and institutions adopt new documents and agreements to define the rules and terms of international cooperation and competition. The formulation and implementation of policies to guide the development of the digital economy is actively underway in the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Comprehensive programmes are being adopted at the national level to ensure cross-sectoral digitalization and maximize the benefits of the process, while minimizing risks and challenges. More specific strategies ensure the digitalization of different areas and sectors of the economy, with a strong focus on e-government and public services. Also, there is now a growing understanding among EAEU members that expansion of integration processes to the field of digitalization can bring significant benefits.

The request for a common digital agenda within the EAEU beyond national programmes and strategies was formulated in 2015 and the main document “Main Areas of Implementation of the EAEU Digital Agenda” (Later referred as “Agenda”) was adopted in 2017 when the implementation of the digital agenda officially started. As of today, the first stage of the Agenda’s implementation has been completed and the second stage is underway. Since 2017, the EAEU’s members and the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) have adopted new documents and approved the launch of the first initiatives and projects. In 2020, the Strategic Directions for Developing Eurasian Economic Integration Until 2025 outlined the key priorities for the Union’s development. The role and place of the digital agenda in the strategy and the extent to which its provisions are designed to address existing problems and barriers and deepen integration can be analyzed. Available facts, data, adopted documents and literature can be interpreted to draw some conclusions regarding the progress of the agenda – the achievements, problems, barriers and challenges – as well as to provide recommendations on possible future directions for cooperation. The aim of this article is to identify the specific features of the EAEU’s 2025 digital agenda and the challenges to its implementation in the context of overall integration processes in the region. This study focuses on supranational processes, interaction within EAEU institutions and relations between the national and supranational levels. While national digitalization programmes are being successfully implemented by EAEU states, the national level of decision-making and agenda-setting is not the subject of this study.

The study reviewed the existing body of literature on the subject, assessed the interest of foreign scholars and analyzed adopted regulations, approved initiatives, interviews and materials produced by Commission members and the Business Council, as well as research conducted by the Commission in partnership with international organizations. The first section provides an analysis of the available literature, while the second contains a brief overview of the digital agenda’s development, its main documents and their objectives. It then presents the main features of the agenda and the problems with its implementation, and finally provides recommendations for future cooperation.

Literature Review

The history of the digital agenda in the context of overall EAEU integration is quite short as the main document “Main Areas of Implementation of the EAEU Digital Agenda” defining the strategy for development and implementation was adopted in 2017 and this field of study is only now gaining momentum. However, several studies have already shed light on many aspects

of the digital agenda. Researchers in the field of law and customs regulation have generated a solid body of work, given that most practical results have been achieved in customs, e-commerce and their legal support. Topics studied include the modernization of the customs administration system [Ivanova, Khapilin, Khapilin, 2020], the regulation of cross-border electronic document management [Shastitko, Shpakova, 2018], digital transport corridor opportunities [Zueva, Shaidulova, 2018] and the development of the digital (electronic) customs institution as part of the “e-customs” cluster [Moser, Sekerbaeva, 2020].

Another important area of academic research is the study of intellectual property rights law within the EAEU under the digital agenda [Shugurov, 2019; 2020], the risks in this area [Lopatin, 2018] and the role of the Commission [Lopatin, 2020]. Authors have also analyzed the implementation of national digitalization programmes and their correlation with the Eurasian agenda [Alybaeva, Dossaaliev, 2018; Enikeeva, 2019; Lis, Slizh, Bogush, 2018].

Research dedicated to a comprehensive assessment of the digital agenda and its place in general integration processes, especially within political science, is still limited. This is partly due to the fact that the agenda has been implemented for only three years and not enough data was available to conduct a comprehensive analysis of outcomes or problems. However, such studies are now coming out [Dyatlov, Trunin, 2020; Kondratieva, 2019; Venidiktov, 2018] as facts and legislation are increasingly becoming established. We can expect a burst of interest in this research area in the coming years, especially with the release of the Strategic Directions for Developing Eurasian Economic Integration Until 2025, as well as the first results of three projects launched in the first stage of the Agenda’s implementation.

Authors outside the EAEU have not yet addressed the topic of the digital agenda of the Union, because most EAEU members typically have small economies and are working to catch up with global leaders in terms of the development of the digital economy; thus, their influence on international processes is limited. Unsurprisingly, Eurasian integration as a project and process in general is almost always seen as Russia’s tool in its quest for regional dominance [Kirkham, 2016; Libman, Obydenkova, 2018; Sergi, 2018]. Numerous studies compare the EAEU to other similar projects of major regional powers seeking to put themselves at the centre of cooperation in their region of interest. The EAEU is compared with China’s Belt and Road initiative [Kaczmarek, 2017], while some authors draw some parallels with the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) and the Union of South American Nations (Unasur) in this context [Krickovic, 2014].

In general, research on the EAEU’s digital agenda is gaining momentum as a specific field of study. Many papers are dedicated to specific challenges and aspects of practical cooperation at the lowest levels of the decision-making process. This reflects the state of play in the integration process in general: because the Commission has enough competence to facilitate decision-making, most results are achieved on the operational level and through day-to-day management, while on higher strategic levels the progress is slow and often limited.

Inception and First Stages of the Implementation of the EAEU’s Digital Agenda

The creation of a unified information system is envisaged by the Treaty on the EAEU. Article 23 defines the framework for cooperation in the field of information sharing within the Union. It prescribes that “interaction on information sharing within the Union is carried out through the Union’s integrated information system, which ensures the integration of territorially distributed state information resources and information systems of authorized bodies, as well as information resources and information systems of the Commission” [EAEU, 2014]. It is assumed that “to ensure effective interaction and coordination of state information resources

and information systems, the member states shall pursue a coordinated policy in the field of informatization and information technology” [EAEU, 2014]. Also, Annex 3 to the Treaty contains the Protocol on Information and Communication Technologies and Information Interaction within the Eurasian Economic Union, which defines the fundamental principles of information interaction and coordination within the Union, as well as the procedure for creating and developing an integrated information system. The creation of a unified information system is an important aspect of a common digital agenda, but it is by no means the only one. As EAEU leaders realized that the digital agenda is much broader and is not limited to interaction in the field of information processing, the development of a common Union-level strategy began.

Work on the EAEU’s digital agenda was launched in Minsk on 26 November 2015, when, at the first meeting of the Presidium of the Eurasian Economic Union Business Council, business representatives proposed empowering the EEC with competence to create a single digital space. The idea was supported by the Commission, which introduced the new portfolio of a board member (minister) for digitalization and information and communication technologies in the new composition of the EEC. The common digital agenda was officially adopted in 2016 after the leaders signed the Statement on the Digital Agenda of the EAEU. In their statement, the leaders expressed the will to “ensure the necessary conditions for shaping the EAEU digital agenda, including by: developing a legal and regulatory framework for the EAEU member states’ digital economy; preparing proposals and sharing experience in protecting and defending intellectual property rights; creating public-private partnerships in the digital economy; stimulating and supporting digital initiatives and projects; supporting dialogue between all interested organizations and citizens of member states” [EEC, 2016b]. A small three-page document launched the official work on the common digital agenda. It was preceded by considerable work done by the Eurasian Commission, which presented its vision on further integration development in the digital economy realm. This vision of the Commission has been significantly reflected in subsequent adopted documents [EEC, 2016a].

In October 2017, the EAEU 2025 Digital Agenda Guidelines were adopted – currently the main document regulating the implementation of the agenda at the supranational level. The objectives of implementing the digital agenda are to “update the established mechanisms of integration cooperation within the Union, taking into account the global challenges of digital transformation, to ensure quality and sustainable economic growth of member states, including for accelerated transition of economies to a new technological mode, formation of new industries and markets, development of human resources. The implementation of the digital agenda will synchronize digital transformation and shape the conditions for the development of the industries of the future in member states” [EEC, 2017]. In general, the implementation of the digital agenda corresponds to one of the key EAEU development goals – that of establishing itself as a “regional centre of power creation.”

Between 2018 and 2019, 10 documents were adopted to regulate the implementation of the digital agenda in the EAEU. Most of them are rather technical or operational. A number of documents instruct the Commission to act in a certain area of cooperation and are important for coordination of work but have no substantive content. The implementation of the Agenda is currently in the middle of the second phase (planned for 2020–21), called “Building Digital Economy Institutions, Digital Assets and Developing Digital Ecosystems.” It is important to analyze the specifics of the first stage of the Agenda’s implementation, as well as to assess the readiness to move on to the next phase (planned for 2022–25), which aims to implement digital ecosystem projects and promote digital cooperation at the global, regional, national and sectoral levels.

Results of the First Stage of the Agenda's Implementation

The second phase of the EAEU digital agenda's implementation is now on track; the first phase has been completed and produced the following results. The initial stage of the strategy had three main objectives: modelling digital transformation processes, presenting the first initiatives and launching the priority projects. The main document "Statement on the Eurasian Economic Union's Digital Agenda" approved by the Council has no detailed description of the goals and tasks to be completed in each of the phases. If we assess the success of the first stage of the agenda's implementation based solely on the description in the EAEU leaders' document, we can conclude that the main objectives have been achieved in that the first initiatives have been developed and three projects have been launched. The first project – the Ecosystem of Digital Transport Corridors of the Eurasian Economic Union – has several objectives: abandon paper-based support for transport and logistics operations and fully switch to online data exchange; create common standards for transport and logistics services; and switch to an integrated oversight system based on data analysis, relieving carriers of a large share of the administrative burden. The second project is the creation of a unified search system, "Jobs Without Borders," aimed at: increasing employment and job opportunities for citizens of the EAEU; enhancing hiring opportunities for employers; introducing modern and efficient digital labour market interaction tools; and accelerating the free movement of labour resources within the Union while developing the digital economy. The third project is the Eurasian Network for Industrial Cooperation, Subcontracting and Technology Transfer. It aims to promote creation of a digital ecosystem to ensure: interaction of economic entities for the purposes of industrial cooperation, subcontracting and technology transfer; involvement of small and medium enterprises in the production chains of large manufacturers; stimulation of innovation processes through technology transfer; and the promotion of products of industry entities using the international digital ecosystems of member states and third countries. The launch of these three projects was not an easy task, made complicated by the unclear distribution of competencies, lack of high-level regulatory acts and the need for constant coordination among member states. As a result, the process of project approval and launching has slowed down even more. This jeopardizes the future of integration in the field of the digital agenda because implementation of projects was the main mechanism of cooperation envisaged by the agreements.

While the launch of three projects can be considered an achievement of the first phase of the agenda's implementation, success on the remaining aspects is very limited. Other mechanisms envisaged by the Agenda are the enhancing and development of Union law and the creation of a so-called sandbox. Progress in these two areas is very modest. No concrete decisions have been taken on the inception of the sandbox; discussions are ongoing. As for the development of Union law, many legal acts have been adopted to coordinate the work on, and facilitate the launch of, the first projects, which can be regarded as progress. However, strategic EAEU-wide acts that would regulate broader aspects and clarify the distribution of competencies and tasks have not been adopted.

Comparing the original vision of the Commission for the implementation of the agenda in its first phase, which can be found in the initial proposal, with contents of the resulting Council decision provides an interesting insight. The Commission, unsurprisingly, envisioned more supranational cooperation and deeper integration, including through law harmonization and the creation of new institutions. According to its vision, during the first phase the EAEU and Commission had to elaborate the EAEU Digital Code, the EAEU Declaration on the Digital Economy, and the relevant national doctrines, including in the field of digital security, by the end of 2018. As part of the first phase, according to the Commission's proposal, it was

necessary to develop national plans to harmonize the normative acts of EAEU members for the regulation of digital assets, processes and infrastructure, and to create and develop systems of common standards in the digital sphere.

The Commission's vision also envisaged the creation of a digital sandbox and an environment for digital start-ups, amendments to the EAEU's and Commission's regulatory documents to ensure the activities of key institutions of digital transformation, the creation and launch of the Eurasian Digital Transformation Centre, a network of digital transformation support centres, a platform for dialogue on digital transformation of industries, the Eurasian Institute for Standardization in the Digital Economy, and draft amendments to the Union's treaty and their approval. Of all the proposals, only the digital sandbox was reflected in the final version of the Agenda. In the end, all initiatives to create supranational institutions were rejected and the Commission's competence was limited to the coordination of national processes. The agenda itself emphasized the supremacy of sovereignty and made it clear that members are not ready for a deepened integration.

In general, the project part of the agenda is being implemented, albeit slowly. Other mechanisms require a much higher level of harmonization, which is being rejected by EAEU leaders for various reasons.

Key Features of EAEU's Digital Agenda

Analysis of the main documents regulating the implementation of the EAEU's digital agenda helps to identify several key features of this process. Some of these features play a positive role and facilitate the integration process, others, on the contrary, create barriers that are often objective and cannot be eliminated quickly, therefore becoming part of the decision-making environment.

Supremacy of Sovereignty

All-important Union-level legal acts adopted to facilitate digital agenda's implementation underline and emphasize the primacy of national interests and the defining role of national strategies for the development of the digital economy. All decisions in the implementation of the digital agenda are made through intergovernmental cooperation. The EAEU (or supranational) level only provides coordination, while the EEC does not have enough competence and real decision-making power. The current agenda envisages coordination without real harmonization and integration. The primacy of sovereignty is evident in the statements and interviews of commissioners, who always underline the efforts made to "build the infrastructure based on the ecosystem of national sovereignty, which does not imply merging everyone into one platform, but instead create a distributed network" [CNews, 2020]. This approach is presented as different to that used in the EU. It is argued that the success of this "infrastructure based on the ecosystem of national sovereignty" model could become an example for other states and alliances.

This principle has both strengths and weaknesses. Strengths include the ability to set priorities at the national level, to take into account national interests and special needs, and ensure the highest level and legitimacy of decision-making through the concentrated political will. Weaknesses include the slow pace of integration processes, as well as unclear roles and distribution of responsibilities of the institutions involved, including supranational ones. In addition, the need to gain approval of decisions at the highest level impedes the process of adopting necessary changes and makes it less efficient.

Absence of Digital Agenda in the Treaty on the EAEU

In 2014, when the Treaty on the EAEU was signed, digitalization had not yet been recognized as one of the top priorities for economic development. Article 23 of the Treaty provides a framework for information interoperability and the creation of a single information system, but, as discussed earlier, this is a very narrow interpretation of the digital agenda, which has been greatly expanded with the adoption of the Agenda. Within just a few years, development of the digital economy has become central to the policies of states and international institutions. Now, the absence of digitalization in the EAEU treaty creates obstacles to the agenda's implementation, because there are no clearly defined competencies of institutions as well as funding mechanisms from the Union budget. The development of the legal and regulatory framework has been identified as one of the priorities for the second implementation phase of the agenda (2019–22), but there is currently no discussion, despite the Commission's proposals, on amending the treaty in this regard.

The main objective of EAEU development in 2020 was agreement on the Strategic Directions for Developing Eurasian Economic Integration Until 2025. The Strategic Directions consist of general provisions and 330 measures and mechanisms grouped into 11 systemic blocks. In general, the document can hardly be called a breakthrough in terms of the development and deepening of integration processes. It very narrowly expands the competence of the supranational level and does not facilitate deepening of integration, mainly concentrating on the continuation of cooperation in existing areas, which include trade and customs regulation, macroeconomic policy and finance, industry and agriculture, energy, digital economy, and transport. The implementation of the Agenda should, among other things, lead to the formation of the digital space of the EAEU [EAEU, 2020]. The document focuses on the practical aspects of cooperation, primarily on the development of electronic commerce and simplification of customs procedures. It also sets the goal to develop Eurasian digital ecosystems and promote cooperation in the field of intellectual property rights protection. The only proposal regarding the introduction of any changes to the text of the Treaty on the EAEU is a proposal to include a definition of the concept of "transboundary space of trust." There are no specific proposals for introducing the digital agenda as a separate new chapter, which means that this area will not be explicitly mentioned in the treaty until at least 2025. At the same time, there is a request from the Commission to include the digital agenda in the treaty to make possible a clear definition of competencies, as well as a potential expansion of the budget of the Union, but, apparently, the members do not want to take such a step.

At the current stage of development, the digital agenda is being implemented rather slowly. Strategic documents have been adopted, as well as the most specific acts that ensure cooperation in particular areas, but the lack of a regulatory framework at the Union level that would regulate broader areas of cooperation, for example, in the field of data management, hinders the development of integration. In this situation, one cannot speak of any serious EAEU influence in the sphere of digital economy regulation at the global level, while at the regional level there are strong competitors, primarily the EU.

Diverging Levels of Digitalization Among EAEU Members

Uneven development is one of the characteristics of integration in the EAEU in general, and in the digital sphere in particular. We can see different levels of access to digital services and technologies in member states and also different levels of elaboration of national digital agendas. Not all EAEU members have the necessary regulation or established definitions, especially in areas of personal data and digital financial services. Due to the primacy of sovereignty, the

existing documents do not provide the grounds for developing common approaches and definitions at the supranational level and their subsequent implementation in the member states. This creates barriers to integration, especially for the creation of common regulatory approaches.

Projects as the Main Instrument for the Agenda's Implementation

One of the main tools for implementing the agenda is the endorsement of initiatives that subsequently become projects. It is through the implementation of projects at the EAEU level that greater integration and harmonization of digitalization processes is envisaged. In the first phase, the aim was to launch several important projects. So far, three initiatives have been approved, as mentioned above. Also, to support the project approach, the Eurasian Development Bank launched a Digital Initiatives Fund in June 2020.

The project-centred approach ensures setting and implementing the most specific tasks, while involving all members in the implementation and increasing the level of synchronization and coordination. At the same time, fragmentation into relatively small and specific projects makes it difficult to ensure connectivity and interoperability. Projects are approved at the highest decision-making level, which makes it more difficult to ensure the coherence of initiatives or to provide the necessary level of efficiency and effectiveness of coordination.

Importance of Expertise

Expertise plays a very important role in Eurasian integration. This is perhaps the most positive feature and gives hope that, with the proper commitment of the parties involved, positive change can be promoted. The involvement of experts, business and other stakeholders, as well as the use of the expertise of highly qualified Commission staff, is an undeniably positive feature of Union-level processes. The Commission currently runs several expert platforms in a number of areas on the digital agenda and is engaged in active cooperation with international organizations. For example, a joint study on the development of the digital agenda was carried out with the World Bank. However, at this stage, expert capacity has not yet been transformed into a driver of digital integration processes. This is partly due to the desire to make decisions at the highest possible level and at the intergovernmental level such that all initiatives have to be approved by each member's head of state.

Recommendations for the Next Stages of the Agenda's Implementation

Integration processes in the EAEU are slowly developing, strategic areas of cooperation are periodically reviewed, and proposals for new regulations and changes to existing ones are made. The digital agenda was initially absent from the EAEU treaty, but the necessary documents to start its implementation have been agreed upon and the implementation has been launched. Therefore, it is very important to propose recommendations for the future implementation of the agenda. Unfortunately, assessment of the content of the Strategic Directions for Developing Eurasian Economic Integration Until 2025 shows that, at the moment, the opportunity to advance integration in the area of the digital agenda is being missed. However, changes can and should still be made in the course of implementation. Based on the analysis of the legal and regulatory framework, the implementation of the Agenda, its features, strengths and weaknesses, the following recommendations can be made.

Create a Clear Legal and Institutional Basis for the Digital Agenda

It is crucial to clarify the distribution of responsibilities and powers between the governing bodies at the Union and national levels. Although the development of the legal and institutional framework is mentioned as a priority for the Agenda's implementation during the second phase (2019–22), there is a need to intensify cooperation in these areas. The Commission is introducing new legal acts to ensure the implementation of the current three priority projects, but the number of projects will rise significantly, especially in the third stage. Legal certainty and a clear definition of competencies will make the work more effective. It is especially important to consider inclusion of digitalization into the Treaty on the EAEU, as it is the main document defining the functioning of the Union. On 4 December 2020, Russian prime minister M. Mishustin put forward the idea that the freedom of movement of information should become the fifth freedom within the EAEU, along with the movement of goods, services, capital and labour. So, at least, there is an interest on Russia's part to amend the EAEU's treaty accordingly. It is necessary to actively engage with partners to ensure that all members of the Union support this proposal.

Improve Coordination Between National and Supranational Levels

In areas where the Commission has some autonomy or where it has received full unanimous support from members, the integration process develops more actively but, more often, unclear competencies create a gap between the two levels of decision-making, further strengthening the need for constant coordination. In the case of contradiction or disagreement between members, the Commission's work is hampered and processes slow. There is a need to intensify the interaction of national governing bodies with the Commission, speeding up the decision-making process at national level. This problem is directly linked to the need to improve the legal and institutional framework for implementing the digital agenda. Sometimes, in certain aspects, each of the EAEU countries is ready to deepen integration and actively cooperate with the Commission to ensure the adoption of relevant decisions and regulations. However, the lack of consensus most often impedes the process, and the supranational level does not have enough competence to ensure the necessary agreement between all members.

Facilitate Adoption of National Digital Strategies by EAEU Members and Ensure Their Synchronization

Some EAEU members do not have a strong legal basis in the field of digital economy regulation and are yet to articulate definitions and approaches to several important concepts. This hinders advanced cooperation and coordination on the Union level, especially when national programmes have primacy over EAEU acts. That is why adoption of national strategies with fixed definitions and approaches is of utmost importance to ensure progress of the EAEU-wide agenda. Members need to closely cooperate with each other, exchange best regulatory practices and expertise to ensure convergence and facilitate future collaboration, and exploit the benefits of integration to the full extent. The Commission has an important role to play as well, as it possesses competence and has full coordination responsibility. Another possible way to develop the integration of the digital agenda in the EAEU is to introduce the so-called "multi-speed approach." This approach implies integration of those that are ready, allowing others to catch up later. EAEU members with a strong legal basis and developed digital economy policies can start working on Union-wide normative acts; others will have time to finish the work on their national programmes and laws and can join later, when the necessary acts are adopted.

Improve Efficiency of Project Selection and Management

The first projects of the agenda have already been launched and the coordination experience can be assessed to identify problems and obstacles as well as best practices and successful solutions. Representatives of the business community note that “implementation of the first labelling and traceability of goods mechanisms in the EAEU in general can be considered a success, although the process created a lot of problems and barriers. Different levels of economic development and national priorities were the main cause of troubles” [RUIE, 2020]. That is why the Business Council proposed to introduce the category of “basic sectors,” where the interests of EAEU members and level of development converge the most. Projects falling into these basic sectors should be given priority and launched first to “work out mechanisms for implementing the digital agenda, including the implementation of pilot projects, mastering best practices, testing various mechanisms, technologies and digitalization solutions for their subsequent distribution in other sectors and industries in relation to all freedoms of the Union with access to a set of digital trade services” [Ibid.]. Such an approach can indeed be beneficial as it sets the pattern for cooperation and integration where practices are tested on simple projects and then adjusted for more complex issues and spheres.

Allocate Enough Financial Resources for the Agenda's Implementation, Digital Infrastructure and Skills Development, and Bridging the Digital Divide

Members, and the EAEU itself, should possess and allocate enough resources for the implementation of the digital agenda. It is especially important to provide the Commission with financing needed for the digital agenda and to discuss the EAEU's budget and its composition. All involved parties also should actively engage in cooperation with development banks, mainly the Eurasian Development Bank, whose priorities include financing digital agenda projects through the creation of a specialized fund for digital initiatives.

Development of infrastructure and skills plays a key role in successful development of the digital economy. Interested members can facilitate technology transfer and exchange best practices. For example, Russia has made considerable progress in the advancement of digital public services and can share best practices and expertise, as well as technologies, with other EAEU countries.

Promote Cooperation With the EU and its Members to Lower the Risks of Confrontation

In order to develop digital space in the EAEU and facilitate its integration into the wider global context and prevent isolation, it is necessary to analyze the benefits of including digital aspects in trade agreements with third parties.

It is also important to keep track of and study the EU's digital policy and legal basis. There is a risk of overlapping interests with the EU, especially in some EAEU states, namely Belarus and Armenia. The EU launched the EU4Digital programme as a part of its neighbourhood policy. The programme is designed to promote digitalization in participating parties, including the harmonization of legal space. Participants adopt EU standards in order to benefit from the support. The EAEU's legal space is only starting to take shape while members prioritize national interests and programmes over EAEU-level cooperation. This could lead to the situation in which some EAEU members implement the EU's regulatory framework, which may overlap with EAEU initiatives. Ideally, the EAEU should promote collaboration and partnerships with the EU to form a common legal space for the digital economy's development. However, con-

sidering the current state of affairs in relations between the EU and Russia and other EAEU countries, and the increasing politicization of the issue, this scenario seems unlikely. Still, the EAEU and its members should try to develop dialog with the EU, study its regulatory acts and implement best practices where appropriate. This could become grounds for future cooperation if relations among the parties become closer.

Analyze and Implement Best Practices Introduced by Other Institutions, Cooperate With International Organizations

The EU's experience in several aspects of its digital agenda establishes best practices that could be implemented in the EAEU, taking context into account. EU decisions in non-personal data regulation and reuse of research data are examples of such practices. The EU's legislative acts can also be studied as examples for building a common safe space for personal data management.

The EAEU also needs to continue to expand cooperation with international organizations. The Commission already has a positive experience – cooperation with the World Bank was successful and useful. The EAEU also should engage more actively with key government and non-governmental organizations involved in regulation of the digital economy. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's initiatives, documents, instruments and best practices are also very useful when it comes to developing regulation in the fields of broadband, digital trade, data management, consumer protection and other aspects of the digital economy.

Conclusion

Although slowed by various obstacles and barriers, the EAEU's digital agenda is developing. Its implementation reveals and reproduces patterns of Eurasian integration in general. The Commission tries to do its best within provided competencies, uses and enhances its expertise, and actively engages with business, experts and the academic community. Despite difficulties and remaining challenges brought about by unclear institutional and legal bases, three pilot digital agenda projects were launched.

Sovereignty, and the priority of national interests, remains the main challenge to integration and exacerbates the divide between national and supranational levels of decision-making. This feature of Eurasian integration impedes the process of competence definition and the establishment of a legal framework. At the current stage of Eurasian integration, it is extremely important to clarify and articulate the main goals and principles of the Union. If members want to proceed with deepening integration and overall development, they need to delegate more decision-making power and competencies to the supranational level and Commission, including in the field of digital economy. Forming an economic union was declared the next stage of integration development for the Eurasian Union. This stage of integration implies a much higher level of harmonization and an even stronger supranational level, while competencies of national governments are delegated. But EAEU members are clearly not ready for this step and continue to insist on national sovereignty and "integration in the ecosystem of sovereignty" as a main principle for cooperation. This creates additional barriers to the development of the digital agenda.

EAEU members might see a unique development path for the Union that does not require members to delegate any power at the supranational level while continuing to publicly characterize the processes in the EAEU as integration. If this integration and economic union status is important for the members, they need to address the issues of low efficiency, coordination

and communication problems. They need to upgrade coordination among themselves and with the Commission, introduce prompt response systems to the Commission's requests and ensure efficient and rapid decision-making on the highest levels, mainly by national leaders.

EAEU members can radically reconsider the main goals and principles of the Union and switch to modes of cooperation other than integration. The EU is obviously considered a model and example for the EAEU. However, unwillingness and unreadiness of EAEU governments and leaders to limit national sovereignty, delegate powers and strengthen the role of the Eurasian Court, coupled with drastic differences in the sizes of members' economies and their political and economic weight in international relations, makes it almost impossible to use the EU's experience. Perhaps EAEU members should consider non-integration modes of cooperation or elaborate a completely new paradigm without integration rhetoric and language.

For the Russian Federation it is extremely important to promote cooperation on the digital agenda in the EAEU and neighbouring countries to ensure the realization of its national interest in one of the most important strategic regions – the post-Soviet space. Other international actors strive to strengthen their position in the region as well and try to promote their regulatory space, especially the EU. The importance of the digital economy is only increasing, as is international competition for influence. Russia should resolve the conflict between promotion of national interests and protecting sovereignty at all costs and the need for integration in the post-Soviet space. Multi-speed integration can be considered a way forward. At the same time, a complete reconsideration of models of cooperation in the post-Soviet space and rejection of integration may also be an option.

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