Soft power geopolitics: how does the diminishing utility of military power affect the Russia – West confrontation over the "Common Neighbourhood"

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Abstract

This paper is based on the fact that a number of factors, but particularly the restricting utility of military force between great powers, increase the significance of soft power as a tool both for legitimization and expansion in international relations in general, and in the West – Russia confrontation over the "common (or shared) neighbourhood" in particular. It explores how this fact affects the policies of the Western powers and Russia within the frame of the confrontation they are in. The paper narrows down its analytical focus on the efforts of the Kremlin to affect the public opinion in its neighbourhood and to counter Western soft power. It is argued that the Ukraine crisis has affected Russia's perception of soft power, re-constructed its counter-revolutionary agenda, and increased the profile of propaganda in its foreign policy. The paper concludes that the soft power competition between Russia and West and the policies of the two powers to win over the hearts and minds of people in the shared neighbourhood re-define the character of geopolitical games in the Former Soviet Union.

Keywords: European Union, Common Neighbourhood, Russia, soft power, United States

1. Introduction

The relations between Russia and West (European Union and NATO) have dramatically aggravated in recent years. Russia's aggressive reaction to the overthrow of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych and its illegal annexation of Crimea severed the relations between Moscow and Western countries. The sides went to heavy military build-up alongside the frontiers and many observers alarmed a possible all-out war. For example, earlier this year, a study conducted by the RAND Corporation claimed that Russia could essentially overrun the Baltic states in three days, and there was nothing NATO could do about it (Shlapak and

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Johnson, 2016). Another study concluded that Russia "is modernizing conventional military capability on a large scale; the state is mobilizing for war" (Brewster, 2016). In general, many observers warned against a "tangibly greater likelihood of war among major or regional powers in the international system" (Kofman and Shushentsov, 2016).

However, examining the possibilities of a military collision between NATO and Russia, Mark Galeotti (2016) reaches a rightful conclusion that "almost certainly" we are not sliding to war. In fact, both possibly cosmic costs of military confrontation and probably also Russia's awareness of the far superior military capabilities of NATO countries strengthen the status of the military power as *ultimo ratio* or, as Galeotti points out, a "final 'just in case' option" (Mark Galeotti, 2016). Another political analyst aptly points out that:

> We live in a military world fundamentally different from that of the last century. All-out wars between major powers, which is to say nuclear powers, are unlikely since they would last about an hour after they became all-out, and everyone knows it (Reed, 2016).

Against this background, the non-military components of power (i.e. economic capabilities, technology, cyber power, etc.) gain a decisive importance in the geopolitical rivalries, including in the Russia – West confrontation. Soft power is one of the primary elements of the non-military power whose significance is increasing in this context. It generates the possibility to legitimize the foreign policy actions and to expand the influence over foreign countries. The sides of the Russia – West confrontation have shown strong determination to benefit from this form of power and to invest massively in projects to win over the hearts and minds of people and to influence the public opinion in the former Soviet countries. For this purpose, both Russia and Western countries seek to develop more effective public diplomacy, propaganda, and counter-propaganda. The paper argues that although military power reserves its importance in international relations, its diminishing utility in the West – Russia confrontation boosts the significance of soft power. It underlines that the actual informational/technological revolution and the relatively stronger role of international organizations and non-governmental institutions particularly contribute to this process. The paper looks into the use of soft power in the practice of Western powers and Russia within the frame of the confrontation they are in over the "common neighbourhood" countries (CNCs) – the post-Soviet countries of Eastern Europe and South Caucasus that lie between European Union and Russia. The paper draws on a wider geopolitical perspective and depicts how soft power re-defines the character of geopolitical confrontation between Russia and West over the "common neighbourhood." It mainly explores the narratives and channels that Russia makes use of to get its vision through the contending ones in this region and to create a legitimate ground for its foreign policy manoeuvers.

Due to the limitation in its scope, the paper is focused mostly on the analysis of propaganda (international broadcasting) as an element of soft power and cannot provide a comprehensive analysis on each component of soft power.

The paper builds its empirical argumentation by analysing a wide range of sources, including the articles in the news media, the publications of think-tanks, official documents, and the statements of political elites. The results of public opinion surveys conducted by authoritative poll-taking institutes are used as an empirical basis for measurements of Russia's and West's soft power in the CNCs. The use of these instruments serves to allow the paper to answer the guiding research questions "How does the diminishing utility of military power affect the West – Russia confrontation in the 'common neighbourhood'?" and "How does Russia respond to the growing importance of soft power as a geopolitical tool in its rivalries with the West?".

2. The rise of Soft Power: propaganda and public diplomacy

The concept of soft power, which has been developed by Joseph Nye, conceptualizes the instruments and policies that states employ to wield power over the minds and feelings of foreign publics. According to Nye (2004), soft power is "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments." Quite the contrary to conventional wisdom, soft power is not everything non-military. In academic literature and news media there is a tendency to label all non-military elements of state power as soft power (such as cyber-attacks, economic sanctions, blackmail, etc.) which generates confusion about the term (Ichihara, 2006, p. 197; Goldsmith and Horiuchi, 2012, p. 555; Li, 2009, p. 58; Vuving, 2009, p. 3). This paper defines soft power as the power over the minds and hearts of people that can be wielded through propaganda and public diplomacy. The soft power concept this paper is built on implies that for cultivating favourable opinions in the target countries, states mobilize various components of culture and political values and pursue policies such as granting foreign aid and economic assistance to less developed countries or organizing cultural or scholarly exchange programmes, etc. Soft power is built with strategies like persuasion, deception, or manipulation, but does not contain the pressure or enforcement which, for instance, sanctions or economic pressure involve. This theoretical stance diverges from Nye's conceptualization of soft power which seems to exclude deception as a soft power strategy, although he (2011, p. 93) points out that persuasion involves some degree of manipulation and fraud.

States employ a diverse set of instruments (for instance, international broadcasting, non-governmental organizations, scholarly exchange programs, cultural diplomacy) to engage with foreign publics and deliver their narratives. These narratives might convey false or misleading information, but they still qualify to be considered as part of the state's campaign to wield soft power, as in

the end they intend to wield power over the minds and hearts of the targeted people. Public diplomacy and propaganda are two catch-all terms that comprise the instruments states make use of in this process. Thus, unlike Nye (2003) who dismisses propaganda as a method to wield soft power, this paper analyses it *on par* with public diplomacy. The primary difference between public diplomacy and propaganda lies in the facts that:

(1) Unlike propaganda, which is one-way broadcasting of information to mould minds and feelings, public diplomacy can be characterized as "a two-way street that involves listening as well as talking" (Nye, 2010). Hence, disseminating information through TV and radio channels, newspapers, online news agencies, journals can be characterized as a one-way broadcasting – propaganda. On the contrary, engaging with foreign publics via non-governmental organizations, scholarly exchange programmes, cultural diplomacy, etc. is a two-way communication and can be dubbed as public diplomacy;

(2) States amplify propaganda during wars or serious confrontations (Welch, 2003). In peaceful times, they prefer to cultivate soft power with deeper engagement with foreign publics – public diplomacy;

(3) The states, which are plagued by domestic economic and political problems that they fail to overcome, tend to employ more propaganda methods to wield soft power. Only states that have superior economic and political standards can pursue successful public diplomacy abroad.

Many scholars indicate "influencing the politics and actions of other governments" as the purpose of states to conduct public diplomacy and propaganda (Dóra, 2010, p. 1). In fact, it is often underestimated that by communicating with foreign publics, states also seek to establish legitimacy for their own foreign policies.[1] The soft power instruments allow states to wield power over the minds and hearts of foreign publics, to get their policies supported and accepted as legitimate, and thus to be more successful in international politics. Russia's policies following Crimea's annexation are an excellent example of how great powers make use of soft power with this purpose. In this period, all the Russian media channels, non-governmental organizations, and other public diplomacy institutions in the same line with the Kremlin sought to justify Crimea's "return" to Russia.

Thus, soft power provides great powers with the opportunity to sustain and expand their sphere of influence without or in addition to coercive means. This can be easily noticed in the EU's eastern neighbourhood policies and Russia's efforts to re-integrate post-Soviet countries in the frame of the Eurasian Union. While the EU succeeds in economically and politically integrating the regional countries (e.g. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) with the attractiveness of its

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[1] Here the term "legitimacy" is used in the sense of consensual and supportive environment for one's foreign policies.

model, institutions, and policies, Russia has largely failed to follow the same path. In its policies to pull the CNCs towards its own orbit, Russia tends to deploy soft power in addition to conventional instruments of coercion and pressure. On the one hand, Russia deploys a long range of coercive instruments to prevent a pro-Western drift of the neighbouring countries. Here, we also refer to economic embargos, abuse of "frozen conflicts", sabre-rattling, etc. On the other hand, it builds a diverse set of public diplomacy and propaganda institutions to address the people in the region and to create positive sentiments toward Russia among them. In this sense, Russia's understanding of soft power also resonates with the concept of hegemony of the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci (1971). Gramsci highlights the importance of consent along with coercion as the two pillars of hegemony. He points out that hegemony is established not only on the basis of economic or political spheres, but also on the ideational (cultural and moral) sphere. Gramsci argues that consent and coercion are complementary, and the latter is mobilized when consent fails to sustain the order controlled by hegemonic power.

Historically, the elements of soft power were in the practice of states and other political groups. As Nye (2011, p. 81) points out, "though the concept of soft power is recent, the behaviour it denotes is as old as human history." Nevertheless, it was never more important in the pursuit of foreign policy objectives than it has been in the last decades. A number of reasons, primarily the ones to be discussed below, have made soft power an indispensable element in the geopolitical rivalries between the great powers equipped with nuclear weapons.

First and foremost, the restricting practical scope of military power considerably affects the rise of soft power. An all-out war between great powers can turn out to be catastrophic not only for the sides that are directly involved but also for the entire world. Particularly, the destructive threat of nuclear power, which, as Kenneth Waltz (1979, p. 184) wrote, pushed great powers into "absolute impotence" in their conflicts with each other, has necessitated the development of non-military means in great politics. Therefore, great powers hesitate to resort to military power in the resolution of their problems. For example, during Kuwait's invasion by Iraq in the early 1990s, the United States spearheaded an international coalition which was also supported by the Soviet Union. However, Washington could not launch a similar coalition against Russia when Moscow annexed Crimea in total defiance of the international law and warnings of Western powers.[2]

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[2] The arguments like "diminishing utility of military power" or "restricting practical scope of military force" that this paper refers to as the background of motivation for the present research do not imply that the importance of military power is waning. Quite the contrary, military force is still a vital instrument of national security. This is why, over the years since the late 1990s, the global military expenditures have dramatically increased to over 1.6 trillion dollars in 2015 and are expected to further increase in the upcoming years (Muggah 2016). Nevertheless, due to the possibly disastrous consequences of nuclear

A series of developments in the recent decades have also contributed to the rise of soft power. On the one hand, information revolution is another important factor thanks to which soft power has gained more importance in foreign policy. For some, even the rapid developments in technology and communications are the most central driving force in this process (Mattern, 2007, pp. 101-102; Nye, 2014). On the other hand, even though the world community has not managed to found an international Leviathan that can oversee and control international affairs, the world has gone a long way in this direction after the World War II. The establishment of numerous international organizations, non-governmental organizations, conventions, international courts, etc. has dramatically affected the *modus operandi* of international relations.

Under these circumstances, great powers feel more pressured to seek ways to materialize their foreign policy agendas through non-military means and to justify and legitimize their foreign policy actions with well-established arguments. This need gains even more impetus when they act in a way that is interpreted as the violation of international law by other states or international organizations. If not reacted with due responses, the spread of these interpretations can be detrimental to their interests, erode the legitimacy of their foreign policies, damage their image, and cause some troubles afterwards. For the justification and legitimization of their controversial manoeuvres, states might refer to historical events, precedents, interpretations of international law, etc. The quality of narratives is an important factor in foreign policy. For Nye, in today's world, this is the quality of one's story that enable international relations to succeed (Nye, 2013). Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin (2014) conceptualize it as "strategic narratives" and differentiate three inter-related levels of those narratives: international narratives, national narratives, and issue narratives. The former comprises the narratives about the structure of the international system, its rules and limits, etc. National narratives depict the policies, values, objectives of the state. Issue narratives reach to the unit level and contain the narratives of the state to respond to a certain national or international issue.

3. "Soft" confrontation between West and Russia

The countries that form the buffer between Russia and Europe have been, since over a millennium, either the cause or the battleground of the collision between the two (Chausovsky, 2015). Both Russia and European powers have always tried to dominate these territories, for various economic and geopolitical

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arms, great powers (like the NATO and Russia) cannot easily deploy military force against each other to resolve their conflicts and to kick off the rival powers from the zone of rivalry. This fact reduces the practical scope – utility – of military power in the confrontations between nuclear-armed great powers and raises the significance of soft power as a less costly and non-dangerous alternative to military power.

reasons. Up until the collapse of the Soviet Union, the region had been under full control of Moscow. The disintegration of the Union re-started the old struggle for the former Soviet countries of Eastern Europe (Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine) and South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia).

Russia's approach to these lands is often noted as "Russia's New Monroe Doctrine" (Skak, 2010). This approach, in a similar vein as the original doctrine (1823) of US President James Monroe, declares its neighbourhood as Russia's sphere of influence and vows to protect it at any rate. Hence, Russian leaders assign paramount importance to the former Soviet territories and reaffirm their warning that they would intervene to prevent the occurrence of geopolitical modifications in the region that pose threats to Russia's national security (Reuters, 2015).

Russia interprets the eastern enlargement as a direct threat to its national security and warns with negative consequences. NATO's expansion has been a cause of serious concerns and resentment in Russia since its first wave of enlargement in the 1990s. Not only nationalists, but also many who favour rapprochement with the West oppose NATO's advance in Eastern Europe. Although previously, the Kremlin used to have a more ambivalent attitude towards the EU, this began to change into worse following the announcement of Eastern Partnership programme which envisaged the signing of Association Agreements with Russia's post-Soviet neighbours. Gorodetsky (2003, p. xix) writes that there used to be "a prevalent tendency in Russia to contrast 'the good West of Europe/EU' with the 'bad West of America/NATO.'" The inception of Eastern Partnership deteriorated the EU's image in the eyes of Russian leaders. For Moscow, the Eastern Partnership is an attempt to transform Russia into "a transit country, a backyard and a source of raw materials" (Zamyatina, 2016).

The region is of equal, if not more, importance for the EU and NATO. Many observers consider the former Soviet Eastern Europe and South Caucasus as "the most important neighbouring region of the European Union" (Fischer, 2011). The region hosts a key transport corridor and a transit route for European energy supplies. However, above all, for the EU, the central question of its policy toward this region is the security of its eastern frontiers (Skålnes, 2005; Moravcsik, 1998). It is therefore not a coincidence that NATO's eastward enlargement was first proposed by German policy-makers in 1993, and later supported by the United States and other NATO members (Skålnes, 2005, p.231). Eastern European and Baltic members of the European Union are pushing deeper integration of former Soviet members into the Euro-Atlantic military and political structures to "constitute a buffer zone ("our backyard") against the unfriendly Big Other" (Makarychev, 2013, p. 5).

4. West's "Soft" advance into the post-Soviet space

Ever since the early years of the Cold War, soft power has been an integral part of the grand strategy of the Western powers to prevent the spread of communism in Europe, to liberate Eastern European countries from the Soviet control and, eventually, in the post-Cold War era, to combat Russia's attempts "to re-sovietize the region" (Radio Free Europe, 2012). Walter Hixon (1997) particularly highlights the role of the Western cultural infiltration in "parting the Iron Curtain" and in the ultimate collapse of communism. He states that due to many factors, *inter alia* lack of intensive trade and economic relations between the two rival blocs, cultural infiltration became the most feasible means to influence the evolution of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and Soviet Union.

In the post-Cold War period, the United States and European powers engaged in the post-Soviet region with much more soft power projects, including numerous non-governmental organizations, media channels, cultural projects, etc. These policies helped a lot of people in those countries to liberate themselves from Russia's cultural and informational domination. The people who suffered from worsening economic conditions, corruption, authoritarianism, and violation of human rights and discerned the superiority of the Western political and economic model took it into the streets and sought pro-Western changes. The protests which were later called "colour revolutions" entailed tremendous changes which had been unimaginable merely a decade before.

Russia's aggressive response to these developments with military force and hybrid warfare has led to a serious confrontation with the West. Although in Middle East there is a proxy war going on between Russia and West, the confrontation between the sides in the "shared neighbourhood" has been so far limited to non-military means (economic sanctions, information warfare, cyber-war, etc.) and is unlikely to escalate into a military clash in the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, both sides have been investing more on information campaigns and accusing each other of broadcasting propaganda. The West regards Russia's information war as a security threat that is "poisoning minds across Russia, on Russia's periphery and across Europe."[3] This concern leads the EU and NATO to initiating a diverse set of projects to strengthen their soft power projection and counter-propaganda instruments.

In March 2015, the European Council initiated the establishment of East StratCom Task Force which is functional within the EU's diplomatic corps, the

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[3] Testimony of Victoria Nuland, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, in Washington, DC (2015), "Testimony on Ukraine Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee", retrieved from http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2015/mar/238147.htm.

European External Action Service. The institution was tasked to engage in developing communication products and campaigns focused on explaining EU policies and promoting European values in Eastern Neighbourhood. At the May 2015 Riga Summit of Eastern Partnership, two studies on the impact of Russian propaganda and the measures that could be taken to counter it were presented at the summit. The studies pointed to the need of *inter alia* supporting independent media over the region and the creation of a Russian language news hub. In June 2015, the East StratCom Task Force, in cooperation with other EU institutions and Member States, developed the Action Plan that drew the contours of effective communication and promotion of EU policies and values in Eastern Partnership countries, as well as in Russia. The EU also discusses broadcasting in local languages, primarily in the Russian language, toward these countries.

A similar institution, named "Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence", was founded by the NATO in Latvia's capital, which Russian media described as "Propaganda centre" (Pravda, 2015). At one of the first high-level conferences organized by the Centre, Laimdota Straujuma, Prime Minister of Latvia, alarmed that "Currently, our values and societies are challenged by new propaganda techniques… [that] are aimed at influencing hearts and minds of people" (Globaltimes, 2015). In early 2016, Reuters reported that NATO was planning to combat Russia's "weaponization of information" with the establishment of new sections and projects (Emmott, 2016). The news agency pointed to the concerns of the EU and NATO about Russia's use of television and Internet to deliberately disseminate "disinformation". The Alliance was set to develop its strategic communications, which Reuters defined as "coordinating various means of informing the media and the public, as well as so-called psychological operations (PsyOps)", to detect information threats and to influence public opinion (Emmott, 2016).

The government-financed international broadcasters of the leading Western countries were also involved in the projects to counter Russia's information warfare. For example, Germany's Deutsche Welle (DW) built up its Russian and Ukrainian editorial office providing 24-hour service. The US's Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty among others, created or expanded 25 programs, mostly in the Russian language in the wake of Russian aggression against Ukraine (Strobel, 2015). Additionally, the agency asked for additional funding, arguing that while Russia spends $400 million to $500 million a year on foreign information efforts, the United States spends about $20 million annually on Russian language services (Strobel, 2015). More prominently, last year, the UK government set up a special force named the 77th Brigade to deal with information warfare. *Guardian* reported that the establishment of the agency "can also be seen as a response to events of the last year that include Russia's actions in Ukraine, in particular Crimea, and Islamic State's (ISIS) takeover of large swaths of Syria and Iraq" (MacAskill,

2015). The troops of the Brigade are reported to cooperate with and trained by their Lithuanian counterparts "on how to combat Russian propaganda" (Tapsfield, 2016).

However, in addition to the already existing public diplomacy institutions, numerous media channels, and various agencies, a new legislation act adopted by the US House of Representatives in September 2016 called on the Secretary of State to "develop and implement a strategy to respond to Russian Federation-supported disinformation and propaganda efforts directed toward persons in countries bordering the Russian Federation."[4] The strategy which is going to be developed in the upcoming months is required to also establish the partnership with governmental and private-sector entities "to provide Russian-language entertainment and news content to broadcasters in Russian-speaking communities bordering the Russian Federation."[5]

5. The rise of soft power in Russia's foreign policy

The soft power concept attracted the attention of Russian foreign policy makers in the aftermath of the Ukrainian Orange Revolution in 2004. The revolution brought pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko to power and side-lined the Russia-supported presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovych. The Kremlin was convinced that in this competition, first and foremost, Russia lost to the Western soft power. In 2008, a Russian political scientist, Gleb Pavlovsky, an adviser to the Russian Presidential Administration at that moment, described the Orange revolution as "a very useful catastrophe for Russia. We learnt a lot" (quoted in Popescu et al., 2009, p. 27). Henceforth, both experts and politicians began talking about the need for special policies on the use of soft power tools in the foreign policy making and underlining the lack of soft power policies as the main reason for the inability of Russia to counter the pro-Western revolutions in its "near abroad" (Latukhina and Glikin, 2005).

The Russian Foreign Policy Review issued in 2007 mentioned "soft power" as a new approach in Russia's foreign policy making for the first time (Kudors, 2010, p. 2). Russia's Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 referred to the concept as *myagkaya sila,* which is argued that it is better translated as "soft force" rather than "soft power" (Drent, Hendriks and Zandee, 2015, p.10). The concept defined *myagkaya sila* as "a comprehensive toolkit for achieving foreign policy objectives

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[4] The official Website of the US Congress (2016), "114th Congress; H.R.5094 - STAND for Ukraine Act," retrieved from https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/5094/text#toc-H62A026388BEB4523B38DE26290186DC1.

[5] Ibidem.

building on civil society potential, information, cultural and other methods and technologies alternative to traditional diplomacy".[6]

With this purpose, the Kremlin founded a wide range of public diplomacy institutions in a short period of time. The new institutions, such as the Ruskiy Mir (Russian World) Foundation (2007), Rossotrudnichestvo - the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (2008), the Gorchakov Foundation (2010), etc), were founded in a short period of time. Moscow also began to provide more support to pro-Russian civil society, cultural and folklore clubs, youth movements, think tanks, and analytical centres in its "near abroad". Having minimized the foreign funding of domestic non-governmental organizations to prevent any threat of colour revolution, the Kremlin launched its own funding programme for NGOs in 2005. Over the years, the major beneficiaries among the NGOs that are supported by this programme have been the Russian Orthodox Church and the organizations that promote Eurasianism – both of which constitute primary elements of Russia's soft power projection to the neighbouring countries (CEPR, 2015).

Russia's soft power outlets are particularly directed to the former Soviet countries, particularly to those which have already chosen the Western path of development – Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. Russia-supported organizations promote the Russian culture and language, youth movements recruit young people who stand for Russian values, and Russia-supported think tanks and research centres provide largely Russia-biased analyses in those countries. They are supposed to bolster emotional attachment to Russia benefitting from the shared history, the Russian language, the popularity of the Russian culture, economic ties, etc. Moscow also initiates and supports projects to influence the public opinion, provoke disillusionment with European Union and NATO, and to generate public support for Russia's integration projects. The Chatham House reports that, only in Moldova, more than 100 pro-Russian organizations have been identified by Moldovan intelligence agencies (Lough, Lutsevych, Pomerantsev, Secrieru and Shekhovtsov, 2014, p. 4). Similarly, in Georgia, Russia finances a number of pro-Russian non-governmental organizations, pro-Russian news outlets (including Georgian-language Internet branch of the Sputnik global broadcasting agency), Russian-language centres in different regions of the country and etc. (Sahakyan, 2016).

Russia's interpretation of national, regional, and international events – its strategic narratives – constitutes the backbone of what Moscow projects to

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[6] Official website of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2013), "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation Approved by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin on 12 February 2013", retrieved from http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/76389F EC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D.

domestic and foreign audiences. In Russia's international narratives, the elements of the Westphalian system and warnings against its erosion constitute a central role. "State sovereignty", "respect for international law", "non-interference", and similar Westphalian norms are largely employed by the Russian officials for both offensive and defensive purposes. With this intent, Russia presents itself as a "norm enforcer" rather than challenging the existing international systemic norms (Sakwa, 2011, p. 970). The Kremlin openly talks about America's "attempt to freeze the world order that has taken shape in the past decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with one single leader at its head, who wants to remain an absolute leader, thinking he can do whatever he likes, while others can only do what they are allowed to do", and asserts that "Russia would never agree to such a world order."[7] Simultaneously, Moscow behaves like a revisionist power that seeks to challenge the Western predominance in international relations. In the international-level narratives of the Kremlin, complaints against the misdeeds of the West, their catastrophic consequences for many people in the world, and the need to avert this trend are likewise central.

While projecting its own values to the neighbouring countries, Moscow also tries to disparage Western concepts such as democracy and human rights. Russian soft power channels often "combine Soviet-era "whataboutism" and Chekist 'active measures' with a wised-up, postmodern smirk that says that everything is a sham" and "not even the West really believes in them" (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014, p. 5). The Kremlin attempts to fill in the ideological vacuum emerged after the collapse of the USSR with conservative Eurasianism. The Russian Orthodox Church firmly advocates for traditional social values, demonizes "the cultural corruption of the West" and supports the Russian officials' view that western standards of human happiness are not relevant to all countries. The Church is also the most influential Russian soft power tool in championing bio-political conservatism (conveying intimate issues such as corporeality, sexuality, family, religious sentiments into political context) in Russia and in its neighbourhood (Makarychev and Yatsyk, 2015). This ideology rejects liberal ideas and presents them as a serious threat to humanity. One of the flagmen of the new conservative Russian ideology, Metropolitan Kirill states that "The liberal idea does not call for liberation from sin because the very concept of sin is absent in liberalism. Sinful manifestations by a person are permitted if they do not violate the law and do not infringe upon the freedom of another person..."[8] Henceforth, they call for

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[7] Official Website of the President of Russia (2015), Vladimir Putin's Speech at Congress of Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, retrieved from http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47636.
[8] Russian Orthodox Church: Official Website of the Department for External Church Relations (2000), "Report by Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad at the 'Orthodoxy on the Threshold of the Third Millennium' Theological Conference", retrieved from https://mospat.ru/archive/en/2000/03/ne003161/.

restriction of civil liberties, free competition, freedom of speech, which, for them, promote the western-style social and cultural degradation.

5.1. Russia's soft power policies following the breakout of the Ukraine crisis

Tellingly, the Euromaidan revolution in early 2014 and the overthrow of President Yanukovych brought new tones to Russia's perception of soft power and made the Kremlin reconsider its soft power policies in general, and its counter-revolutionary agenda in particular. On the one hand, after the Ukraine crisis broke out, Russia's soft power policies with respect to the former Soviet Union, particularly with Ukraine, started to be more concentrated on one-way communication (i.e. propaganda) through media channels. Russian leaders began to put more emphasis on the media and dissemination of Russia-biased information. They described the media as "weapons" and the information war as "the main type of warfare" (Interfax, 2015; Yaffa, 2014). Hence, the Kremlin also boosted the budget of its international media channels, for instance, there was a 41% hike in the 2015 budget of the TV channel RT compared to the previous year (Raybman, 2014).

Since Crimea's annexation, Russian media channels and other soft power outlets have been particularly focused on denouncing the eastward expansion of the European Union and NATO, "colour revolutions," and Ukraine's pro-Western geopolitical shift. They echo Putin's accusations that "the US instigated colour revolutions in the former Soviet region, using the grievances of people against their governments in order to impose their values that contradict the local tradition and culture. These efforts were directed against Ukraine, Russia and Eurasian integration."[9] These channels often do not shy away from broadcasting disinformation and conspiracy theories to reach foreign policy goals. The Kremlin appears to firmly believe the maxim that a lie told often enough, becomes the truth. From this perspective, the policies of modern Russia are considered by many observers, including some Russians, more malevolent than those of the Soviet Union. In similar vein, Gleb Pavlovsky points out that:

> The main difference between propaganda in the USSR and the new Russia… is that in Soviet times, the concept of truth was important. Even if they were lying, they took care to prove what they were doing was 'the truth.' Now, no one even tries proving the 'truth.' You can just say anything. Create realities (Pomerantsev et al., 2014, p. 9).

On the other hand, the Ukraine crisis made Russia become louder in declaring the possibility of use of military force to counter "colour revolutions" in

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[9] Translated by Lutsevych (2016, pp. 6-7) from Vladimir Putin's Speech about Crimea: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApP5sWCpjDY.

the region (Golts, 2015; McDermott, 2015). Russia's new Military Doctrine that was accepted in December 2014 and the National Security Strategy that President Vladimir Putin approved at the end of 2015 characterize colour revolutions amongst the security threats that Russia is facing. Nicolas Bouchet (2016, p. 1) interpreted these developments as Russia's "[move] from securitizing the issue of anti-regime protests to militarizing it". He (2016, p. 3) points out that the depiction of mass protests as a security threat will allow Russia to intervene to protect pro-Russian political elite in some former Soviet countries:

> Russia would not need a fabricated scenario or disputed pretext – as in Crimea or Georgia – for sending troops to prop up a government against mass protests. Neither would it need to resort to hybrid or covert methods instead of standard military ones. It could act at a government's invitation, bilaterally or under a multilateral agreement. In some neighbouring countries, Russia could act under its Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) commitments – alone, with other member states or through the organization's rapid reaction force. If Russia now defines protests as a form of warfare, it could claim this fits under the CSTO treaty obligation of mutual defence against aggression.

However, although Russian leaders consider the possibility of responding to colour revolutions and hybrid warfare with conventional troops, they themselves are aware of the fact that this has little potential to be successful (Nagornykh, 2016). That is why the Russian military is planning to develop its soft power concepts to fight against unconventional attacks (Nagornykh, 2016). These concepts are likely to include all the instruments that can be useful to influence the hearts and minds of the people in and outside Russia. The statements of the Russian leaders demonstrate that the Kremlin is resolved to spare no effort to achieve this objective. For example, Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov (2013), who believes that "responding to [hybrid warfare and colour revolutions] using conventional troops is impossible" (Sputnik, 2016), had already written about these instruments in 2013:

> The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures.

Thus, on the one hand, Russia invests in soft power to influence the policies of the former Soviet states bordering Russia in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, to re-establish its control over them, and to get its foreign policies accepted as legitimate by local people, while on the other hand, it threatens with and prepares the legal ground to use military force if it fails in "softer" ways. The

Ukraine crisis has evolved these two elements in Russia's foreign policy to an unprecedented level in the post-Soviet period.

5.2. Do Russian soft power policies succeed?

Russia's propaganda outlets appear to be reaching some of their objectives both in Russia and the former Soviet region. Last year, a survey by the independent Levada opinion research institute revealed that about half of Russians believed that they received "objective information" from television, which is the primary source of information for almost 90 percent of the Russian population (Semenova, 2015). Similarly, in 2014, following the annexation of Crimea, a public opinion poll conducted by Gallup in 12 countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union (excluding three Baltic States) concluded that many people in these countries considered the Russian media as a more reliable source than the Western media (Bernstein, 2016). The poll indicated that "majorities in most of the former Soviet states, particularly those "who lived in urban areas and were better educated tended to be more supportive of Russia's policy with regard to Crimea" (Bernstein, 2016).

Nevertheless, the Kremlin's propaganda is less successful in the countries that have territorial conflicts with Russia. The studies show that Russia's use of force in and occupation of some territories of Georgia and Ukraine has damaged its image in these countries, whereas the policies of the Western powers tend to be more positively estimated. This year, a Gallup poll found out that Russia is seen as the biggest threat by the residents of Georgia (48%) and Ukraine (52%) (Esipova and Ray, 2016). Another polling indicated that while just 4% (ICPS, 2010) of the respondents rated Russia unfavourably in Ukraine in 2010, the percentage of these people went up to around 60% (Pew Research Centre, 2014) in 2014. Accordingly, Moscow's propaganda and its demonization of Western values fail to produce the expected results in the countries that have been previously subject to the overt military intervention of Russia.

Concurrently, regardless of Russia's countermeasures, the image of the EU is in a positive track in the countries of post-Soviet Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. Public opinion polls indicate that the EU has started to be more positively estimated by the regional population since Russia's latest military manoeuvres in Ukraine. A public opinion poll in autumn 2014 concluded that fewer people in the Eastern Partnership countries saw the EU in a negative light (17%) while the proportion of respondents considering the EU's image as positive was found significantly higher (44%) (EU Neighbourhood Info Centre, 2014). This exerts some impact on the geopolitical orientation of the regional states, especially of those who have already taken the Euro-Atlantic integration path. For example, a Georgian political analyst believes that: "Georgia… continues to move

along a path of Euro-Atlantic integration, and the probability of the reversal of this tendency is practically equal to 0" (Vasadze, 2016).

6. Conclusion

This research on the soft power competition between Russia and West leads to the conclusion that soft power re-defines the character of geopolitical games in the Former Soviet Union. This is no longer only the military power that determines who dominates a region, but states are also compelled to fight in the non-military spheres. Writing about the role of soft power in the contemporary international relations, a Russian professor has rightfully concluded that: "The world seems to be back to the late Middle Ages. If after the Augsburg agreement in 1555, the principle 'cuius region, eius religio' ('whose realm, his religion') was established in Europe, in modern times, this principle is 'whose soft power, his region'" (Ponomareva, 2012).

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