

BRIDGING A (MIS)PERCEPTIONAL GAP: THE EU'S EASTERN PARTNERSHIP AND RUSSIAN POLICIES IN THE TRANS-CAUCASUS¹

AB'nin Doğu Ortaklığı Projesi ve Rusya'nın Güney Kafkasya Politikaları:
Ortak Bir Algı Geliştirmek

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Abstract:

The launch of the EU's Eastern Partnership in 2009 has puzzled both Russian decision-makers and experts. To the date they cannot arrive to any specific conclusion: whether this project is another geopolitical challenge to Russia's domination in the post-Soviet space or a potential platform for cooperation both with the EU and countries of the region? The author believes that regardless numerous misunderstandings and misperceptions there is a 'window of opportunity' for the EU, Russia and Trans-Caucasian countries to develop a joint cooperative strategy.

Keywords: *European Union, Eastern Partnership, Russia, "soft" power*

Öz:

Avrupa Birliği'nin 2009 yılında Doğu Ortaklığı Programını devreye sokması Rus uzman ve karar mercilerinin kafasını ciddi anlamda karıştırmıştır. Zira Rus karar mercileri söz konusu programın Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasıyla boşalan sahada Rusya'nın hâkimiyet kurmasına sorun teşkil edip etmeyeceği veya AB ile bölge ülkeleri arasında bir işbirliği platformu oluşturup oluşturamayacağı konusunda hala somut bir sonuca ulaşamamıştır. Konu ile ilgili birçok yanlış anlaşılma ve algılamaya rağmen yazar, Avrupa Birliği, Rusya ve Güney Kafkasya ülkeleri arasında ortak bir işbirliği stratejisinin geliştirilmesi için bir fırsat aralığı oluştuğuna inanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Avrupa Birliği, Doğu Ortaklığı, Rusya, "yumuşak" güç*

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INTRODUCTION

The EU-Russian cooperation in various fields has been developed quite dynamically over the last two decades. Despite some ups and downs there was an obvious progress in many spheres of the EU-Russian bilateral relations, such as Partnership for Modernization (PfM), energy, transportation, information technologies, telecommunications, environment protection, visa facilitation regime, education, research and culture. The EU has become Russia's largest trade partner and source of investment, while Moscow is one of the main energy suppliers to Europe. The two actors try to coordinate their both global and regional strategies to make the world and their neighborhood a safer place. For example, since 2000 Moscow took an active part in the EU's Northern Dimension Initiative that involved Russian north-western regions in a quite intensive sub-regional cooperation with neighboring countries. A solid legal and institutional basis for the bilateral cooperation has been established (although the Partnership & Cooperation Agreement (PCA) of 1994 has expired in 2007 and has been prolonged on the annual basis so far). In May 2005, the so-called roadmaps towards four EU-Russia common spaces were adopted. In 2010, the Committee on Foreign and Security Policy was established at the ministerial level with the aim to solve major security problems in Eastern Europe, including local conflicts such as Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.²

Although Russia has increasingly embraced the growing number of cooperative projects with the EU, there have also been a number of limitations restricting Russia's engagement and the success of different projects, such as residual mistrust and prejudices, both Brussels and Moscow bureaucracies' resistance, authoritarian trends in Russia's domestic policies, uneasy relations between 'old' and 'new' EU members, conflictual interests in the post-Soviet space and (as mentioned) the lack of an updated and revised PCA. Therefore, when thinking about the future of the EU-Russia cooperation it is important to note that in the current situation both challenges to and opportunities for such a cooperation can be identified. And the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) project is not an exception.

In the 1990s Moscow was absolutely positive about EU's regional and sub-regional initiatives and encouraged Russian border regions to participate in various trans- and cross-border collaborative projects. However, when in 2002-2003 Poland (being still a candidate country) has launched the Eastern Dimension initiative that was aimed primarily at engaging Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova and only in the second place - the Russian exclave region of Kaliningrad, Moscow's attitude to Brussels' regionalist projects in the near neighborhood became more

² Sergunin A, "Towards an EU-Russia Common Space on External Security: Prospects for Cooperation," *Research Journal of International Studies*, No. 24, (2012): 18-34.

suspicious. Some of the Russian strategists tended to believe that such initiatives had a secret goal to undermine Russia's geopolitical positions in its traditional sphere of influence.

That's why the EU's European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) of 2004 has got a cold reception from Moscow and the latter refused to join the initiative claiming special status in its relations with Brussels. For the same reason, Russia was quite suspicious about other EU regional/sub-regional projects such as the Black Sea Synergy (April 2007), Central Asian Strategy for New Partnership (June 2007), Arctic Strategy (November 2008) and Baltic Sea Strategy (June 2009).

Although the EaP has not come as a surprise for Russia it was perceived by Moscow as another ('soft') security challenge in the post-Soviet space, including the Trans-Caucasus (South Caucasus). Being puzzled with the 'real intentions' of the project, Russian foreign policy schools differed by their approaches to the EaP and suggested various - sometimes polar - policy recommendations on how Moscow should react to this EU initiative. Along with other problematic issues in the EU-Russian relations, the EaP has become one more source of numerous misunderstandings between Brussels and Moscow. These misunderstandings revealed the fact that the two international players have fundamental differences as regards their visions of the future of the Trans-Caucasian countries and policy methods to be implemented in the region.

The main research objective of this study is two-fold: On the one hand, to identify major sources of the EU-Russian misperceptions in case of the EaP. On the other, to contemplate how these misperceptions could be overcome and how the EU-Russian dialogue on the EaP could be restructured in a more cooperative spirit. To be more specific this article mainly focuses on the following research questions: How is the EaP perceived by the Russian foreign policy schools? What are the major Russian concerns and doubts about the EaP? Is Russia able to effectively implement the 'soft power' strategy in Trans-Caucasus? What should be done to make the EaP a proper venue for the EU-Russia cooperation in South Caucasus rather than a bone of contention between the two key regional players?

1. WHAT IS THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP ABOUT?

The EaP has been launched at the Prague summit (7 May 2009) and involved Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. According to the Prague declaration, "The main goal of the Eastern Partnership is to create the necessary conditions to accelerate political association and further economic integration between the European Union and interested partner countries... With this aim, the Eastern Partnership will seek to support political and socio-economic



Map 1. The Trans-Caucasian region.

reforms of the partner countries, facilitating approximation towards the European Union”.³ More specifically, the EP has the following four aims:

First, to intensify the bilateral relations between the EU and the partner countries with the aim to provide the foundation for association agreements between them. These agreements, which include many new areas of cooperation, will create strong political ties, and will become the basis for further implementation of the EU legislation and standards in the partner countries. They

provide the partner countries with a privileged position in relations with the EU. In turn, new association agreements should provide for the establishment of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs), where the positive effects of trade and investment liberalization will be strengthened by regulatory approximation leading to convergence with EU laws and standards. Through DCFTA agreements the EaP countries have the possibility of economic integration with the market and enjoy the same benefits that have ensured rapid development of western economies. The partner countries could benefit fully from the influx of EU investment and capital as well as access to modern technology necessary for their modernization.

Negotiations with Ukraine on an association agreement, including a DCFTA, have been finalized, and the agreed text was initialed on 30 March 2012. However these documents have not been signed because of the lack of progress on the human rights situation in Ukraine. Negotiations of association agreements have been launched with Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and they are advancing well. The decision to launch negotiations on DCFTAs with Georgia and Moldova was taken in December 2011 and with Armenia in February 2012. According to the EaP Roadmap to the November 2013 Summit in Vilnius, negotiations on association agreements with Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan should be finalized by this moment.⁴ DCFTA negotiations with Armenia, Georgia and Moldova should be well advanced, if not finalized. Azerbaijan should have

³ “Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit,” 7 May 2009, Prague, (Accessed May 11, 2009), http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/er/10758.pdf.

⁴ “Eastern Partnership: A Roadmap to the autumn 2013 Summit,” *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions*, Brussels, 15.5.2012, (Accessed February 19, 2013), http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/docs/2012_enp_pack/e_pship_roadmap_en.pdf, 5.

made progress towards WTO accession as a precondition for starting DCFTA negotiations.

Second, the EU develops Comprehensive Institution-Building Programs individually with each partner country in order to improve their administrative capacity. This is a completely new initiative, which did not exist in the ENP. By improving administration the partner countries will better cope with meeting the obligations arising from the new agreements with the EU. Over 170 million euro has been allocated to the CIBPs for 2011-2013.⁵ Both in the EU and the partner countries the so-called contact points have been established, in which each country and organization obtains information on how to get involved in the construction of well-functioning institutions, which determine the project's success.

Third, promotion of mobility of citizens of the partner countries through visa facilitation and readmission agreements and, at the same time, fighting illegal migration and improvement of the border management system. The EU helps the partner countries to develop high quality control procedures at the borders and appropriate infrastructure, such as adequate number of border points, high quality documents, a sufficient degree of computerization, as well as effective systems for data protection. Georgia is ahead of other Trans-Caucasian countries in this field: since March 2011, Georgia has been successfully implementing visa facilitation and readmission agreements. Mobility partnerships are in place with Georgia and Armenia. In March 2012, the European Commission started negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission agreements with Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Negotiations on both the visa facilitation and readmission agreements with Armenia have been swiftly concluded and the Visa Facilitation Agreement with Armenia was signed in December 2012.⁶ It is anticipated that negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission agreements with Azerbaijan will be concluded by the Vilnius EaP summit. The establishment of a mobility partnership with Azerbaijan is envisaged as well. Effective implementation of visa facilitation and readmission agreements and effective cooperation in a wide range of justice and home affairs areas could lead to the start of negotiations on Visa Liberalization Action Plans with Georgia, and later on also with Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The EaP also aims to strengthen energy security through long-term stable and secure energy supply and transit, including through better regulation, energy ef-

⁵ "Eastern Partnership", (Warsaw: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, 2011), (Accessed October 3, 2011), <http://www.petersburgkg.polemb.net/files/partnerstwo%20wschodnie/smoln-angru.pdf>, 16.

⁶ "Council conclusions on the Eastern Partnership," 3222nd Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Brussels, 18 February 2013, (Accessed February 19, 2013), http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/135513.pdf, 2.

efficiency and more use of renewable energy sources. Georgia and Armenia are observers to the Energy Community, a powerful tool for European integration. Nuclear safety improvements are ongoing in Armenia. This country undertook, following the Fukushima accident in 2011, to voluntarily perform, ‘stress tests’ on the basis of EU specifications.

Along with bilateral EU-EaP countries cooperation, there is a multilateral dimension of the Partnership. Actions in the multilateral dimension are conducted under four *thematic platforms*, which include the following policy areas:

- democracy, good governance and stability
- economic integration and convergence with EU policies
- energy security
- contacts between people

To be able to see the tangible effects of the cooperation in the partner countries, the EaP has taken on five *flagship initiatives*:

- a program of integrated border management,
- support for the development of small and medium enterprises (SME Facility),
- regional electricity markets, energy efficiency and renewable energy sources,
- environmental governance,
- prevention, preparedness and response to natural and man-made disasters.

In addition to the inter-governmental level, the EaP also includes cooperation between parliaments. The initiation of the work of the EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly in May 2011 launched the parliamentary dimension of the EaP as a forum for dialogue with representatives of parliaments of the partner countries.

It was planned from the very beginning that the EaP implementation is to be facilitated by an active participation of the non-governmental sector. This led to the creation of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, which brings together civil society representatives from countries participating in the EaP, including the EU. The first Forum meeting was held in November 2009 in Brussels. It was attended by over 200 representatives of NGOs. The Steering Committee, which coordinates the activities of organizations from the EU and the six partner countries, was appointed. The Forum’s meetings are being held on the regular basis. To support NGOs financially a Civil Society Facility was established.

The Committee of the Regions – the EU institution that offers representatives of

local governments the opportunity to assess legislation drafted by Brussels, partakes in the implementation of the EaP. The Committee is particularly interested in the development of democracy and people-to-people relations in the EaP countries. It also makes clear that local governments are responsible for enforcing two thirds of the EU's regulations. The Committee played a crucial role in establishing a Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership in September 2011.

As far as the EaP funding is concerned, it is done through the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) which was established in 2006. To initiate projects under the EaP as soon as possible, Brussels decided to allocate to the project €600 million for the period 2010-2013, of which €350 million represented entirely new funds. Later, taking into account partner countries' criticism, the EU decided to increase the EaP financial support by €1.9 billion.⁷

2. RUSSIAN THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE EaP

The EaP, first of all, has represented a theoretical challenge to the Russian foreign policy thinking.

For the *geopoliticians* and *political realists* (who are currently the dominant schools both in the Russian academic community and among the decision-makers) the EaP is a continuation of power politics but by other (non-military/economic) means. In this case the EU/West uses 'soft' instead of 'hard' power. According to these schools the main EaP's geopolitical purpose is to side-line Moscow in this part of the post-Soviet space or even to force out Russia completely from its traditional sphere of influence.

The *liberals* and *globalists* (quite marginal and highly divided groupings) believe that the EaP—being, by its spirit, a European integrationist project - will be helpful in creating a more prosperous and secure EU's neighborhood. It will be beneficial for six partner countries because the EaP aims at promotion of socio-economic, political and administrative reforms in these post-Soviet states and preparing association and DCFTA agreements with the EU. They also believe that it could be another avenue for the EU-Russia cooperation on creating common spaces in Europe. To their opinion, the current EU-Russia problems with the EaP are results of misperceptions and misunderstandings rather than a fundamental difference of interests. They strongly believe that the balance of interests rather than power balance (as realists put it) should be reached in the EaP area.

⁷ "Council conclusions on the Eastern Partnership," 3.

According to another school, *social constructivism*, the EaP is a typical case of securitization from both sides. The EU exaggerates Russia's 'imperialist' ambitions in the post-Soviet space and Moscow's inclination to use the so-called 'energy weapons'. Russia securitizes 'normal' challenges of European/Eurasian integration by perceiving them as 'soft' security threats. The constructivists note that the EaP has intensified the debate on identity issues both in six partner countries and Russia. They believe that most of the EaP partner countries opted for the European identity while Russia claims a Eurasian one and tries to make it attractive for the post-Soviet states through various initiatives, such as Customs Union and Eurasian Union.

3. RUSSIAN CONCERNS ABOUT THE EaP

Moving from the academic to the expert/practitioner level it should be noted that the EaP was met by Moscow both with caution and skepticism because it was not sure about the real EaP's goals: whether the EU is serious about making its new neighborhood stable and safe place or it is a form of a geopolitical drive to undermine Russia's positions in the area. The EaP is an especially sensitive issue for Moscow because it has fundamental interests in the region that range from strategic-political (confederation with Belarus, military-technical cooperation with Belarus and Armenia, military conflict with Georgia, support of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) to economic (investments, trade, energy supply, etc.) issues. The Russian concerns regarding the EaP can be summarized as follows:

- Some Russian specialists believe that the EaP 'hidden agenda' aims at undermining Russia's geopolitical dominance in Eastern Europe and Caucasus.⁸ The EU views Russia as a revisionist power that tries to restore its former control over the post-Soviet space. Brussels interpreted the Russian-Georgian military conflict of 2008 and 'gas wars' with Ukraine as an evidence of Russia's imperialist intentions. In this sense, the EaP is seen by Moscow as the EU's attempt to withdraw six post-Soviet states from Russia's sphere of influence and establish a sort of protectorate on them.
- Moreover, the EaP may potentially undermine Moscow's own integrationist projects (CIS, Customs Union, Eurasian Union, Belarus-Russia Union State, etc.).⁹
- The EaP may weaken subregional organizations where Russia participates (e.g., the Black Sea Economic Cooperation).

⁸ Tarasov S., "Vostochnoe partnerstvo" – lovushka dlyz Azerbajjana [The Eastern Partnership – a trap for Azerbaijan], (Accessed May 25, 2009), www.regnum.ru/news/1166539.html.

⁹ Zhiltsov S.S., *SNG pod natiskom "Vostochnogo partnerstva"* [The CIS under the pressure of the Eastern Partnership]. (Accessed May 25, 2009), http://www.ng.ru/politics/2009-04-30/3_kartblansh.html.

- The EaP may downgrade the status of the EU-Russia Four Common Space arrangement and make the EaP participants a more important priority for the EU than Russia (in spheres such as preparing investment, trade, transport, movement of people, etc.).
- Moscow is puzzled by the motivation of some of the EaP countries.¹⁰ While Georgia have clearly expressed its intentions to join Western economic and security institutions (EU and NATO), Armenia is Russia's strategic ally who is dependent on Moscow's economic and military assistance. Azerbaijan has significant economic stakes in cooperation with Russia as well. Moscow does not understand why these countries opted for a pro-EU orientation in a situation when Brussels is unable to offer them substantial financial aid or other benefits. On the contrary, soon after the Prague summit the EU sent a clear signal to partner countries that the EaP is not a way to the EU membership.
- Many Russian experts believe that the main EU's interest in case of the EaP is building of alternative gas and oil pipelines bypassing Russia (such as Nabucco or White Stream see Map 2). Georgia and Ukraine are considered as important transit countries while Azerbaijan can serve both as a source of and transit point for energy supplies. Russian specialists, however, doubt that these plans are realistic and believe that any new energy transport schemes without Russia's participation are doomed to failure.¹¹

4. RUSSIA'S SKEPTICISM ABOUT THE EaP

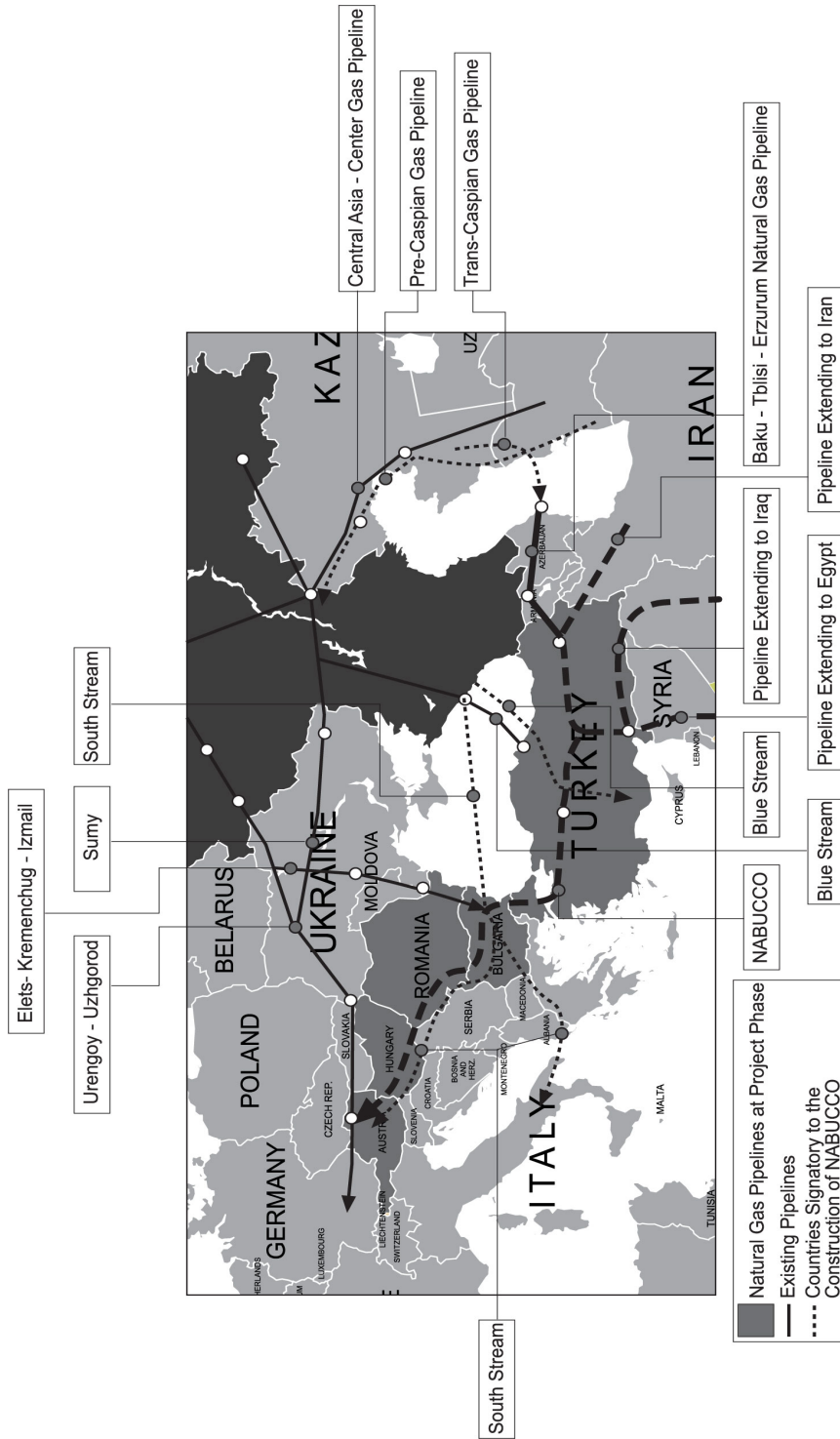
Along with political and economic concerns, Moscow expresses deep skepticism about the feasibility of the EaP project. First of all, because of the global financial-economic crisis and necessity to financially support its 'newcomers' the EU is unable to allocate considerable amount of money to the EaP project. For the same reason, it cannot also attract resources of international financial institutions and private capital. As a result of this the EaP has a rather poor funding: neither €600 million nor €1.9 billion are enough to implement ambitious purposes of the project.

Secondly, since the EaP does not promise the EU membership to the partner countries most of them are quite skeptical about the project as such and often imitate its implementation rather than do a real 'homework'. Third, there are numerous doubts

¹⁰ Malkov D., "*Vostochnoe partnerstvo*" kak zerkalo evropeiskikh ozhidaniy sosedei RF [The Eastern Partnership as a mirror of European expectations of Russia's neighbors], (Accessed May 25, 2009), <http://www.rian.ru/world/20090508/170439144.html>.

¹¹ Shenin S.Y., *Mifologiya "Belogo Potoka"* [Mythology of the "White Stream"], (Saratov: Center for Cooperation with CIS and Baltic countries, Saratov State University, 2008), (Accessed May 24, 2009), <http://cis-center.ru/>.

Map 2. Existing and planned gas pipelines.



about the feasibility of democratic reforms by the EaP participants: some of the partner countries (e.g., Azerbaijan or Georgia under Mikhail Saakashvili) were led by authoritarian or kleptocratic regimes that are reluctant to implement any serious democratic reforms. Fourth, there is a big difference of opinion among the project participants on project's priorities, final outcomes, ways and means of its implementation.

There are serious disagreements and even conflicts between the EaP participants themselves which may prevent effective implementation of the project (e.g., Nagorno-Karabakh). The EU was unable to solve these conflicts with the help of the EaP project. Serious disagreements also continue to exist among the EU member states regarding the EaP: Central and East European countries, Germany, Sweden are *pro*; France and Spain are *contra* (or jealous); the rest is indifferent/skeptical. Notably, the leaders of a number of influential EU countries, such as UK, France, Italy and Spain have not attended either the Prague or Warsaw EaP summits. Thereby they demonstrated the fact that the EaP obviously was not among their major foreign policy priorities.

Lastly, it could be argued that there is also a certain inconsistency between different EU regional initiatives in its 'new neighborhood'. Despite the fact that the Prague declaration has specially underlined that the EaP is not a hindrance for implementation of the existing regional projects, it is not clear how the EaP will be coordinated, for example, with the EU's Black Sea Synergy (April 2007). This arrangement is crossed with the EaP territorially, substantially and institutionally in many respects. For example, five of six EaP partner countries (except Belarus) are participants of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation. Moreover, some European analysts (especially the French ones) express concerns regarding a potential competition (for resources) between the EaP and the Mediterranean Union project supported by Paris. Many Russian experts believed that the above inconsistencies sooner or later should result in duplications and parallelisms with similar EU regional initiatives as well as financial and organizational problems with the EaP project implementation.

It appears that both the Russian expert community and practitioners lack a clear and objective vision of the EaP and its implications for Russia. Most of the Russian experts are either negative or skeptical about the EaP and its future. Quite often emotional and subjective assessments (that are not supported by solid empirical evidence) prevail. It seems that the lack of a sound Russian strategy towards the EaP is one of the sources of misunderstanding between the EU and Russia, misunderstanding that sometimes contributes to derailing the Brussels-Moscow dialogue. As a result of this, both the EU and Russian policies often give an impression of muddling on rather than a sound and forward-looking strategy.

5. IS RUSSIA ABLE TO BE A ‘SOFT’ POWER IN SOUTH CAUCASUS?

It became a common-place to ascertain that in the post-Cold War period key international players prefer to exercise ‘soft’ rather than ‘hard’ power. According to the adepts of the ‘soft power’ concept, the economic, socio-cultural, institutional and legal instruments are much more efficient now than the military strength or direct political pressure. For many nations, ‘hard’ power became an exceptional tool and a last resort in their foreign relations rather than a day-to-day practice. ‘Hard’ power is now mainly applicable to those international actors who violate international law or directly threaten national, regional or global security.

The ‘soft power’ concept has increasingly become attractive to the Russian leadership over the last few years. In 2011-2012, the ‘soft power’ theme was a popular refrain in the Russian pre-election debates, including the so-called ‘programmatic’ articles by Vladimir Putin. Being re-elected in 2012, President Putin called Russian foreign policy makers to think about utilizing non-traditional foreign policy instruments, including the ‘soft power’ ones.¹² The need for ‘soft power’ capabilities was mentioned in the draft of Russia’s new Foreign Policy Concept (December 2012).

Given the fact that the Trans-Caucasus is an important priority for the Russian ‘soft power’ strategy a number of critical questions arise: Is Russia able to be a ‘soft power’ in South Caucasus? If yes, what are the real, not declaratory, aims of Russia’s ‘soft power’ strategy in the region? What resources and instruments are available for Russia? Whether Kremlin’s ‘soft power’ policies are efficient or not?

5.1. Soft’ Power: Potential and Resources.

According to Joseph Nye, the author of the concept, the ‘soft’ power is, first and foremost, an ability to be attractive. The ‘soft’ power of a country rests primarily on three resources: “its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority).”¹³ There are also economic dimensions of the ‘soft’ power albeit they can effectively serve as ‘hard’ power’s instruments. The Russian political class believes that the country possesses a huge ‘soft power’ potential but it is misused or used ineffectively.

¹² Putin V., *Ukaz Prezidenta RF ot 7 Maya 2012 No. 605 “O merakh po realizatsii vmeshnepoliticheskogo kursa Rossiyskoi Federatsii”* [Decree of the President of the RF, 7 May 2012, No. 605 “On the measures on the implementation of the Russian Federation’s foreign policy course”], (Accessed February 14, 2013), <http://text.document.kremlin.ru/SESSION/PILOT/main.htm>.

¹³ Nye J., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 11.

For example, Russia has a significant economic potential which can be applicable to the Trans-Caucasian region. The international consulting company *Ernst & Young* awarded Russia the 3rd rank among the emerging markets and 10th rank among the global top ‘soft powers’.¹⁴ At the same time, the global financial crisis hit the Trans-Caucasian economies (except Azerbaijan) much stronger than the Russian one. Now Russia is an attractive market for the foreign labor force rather than a source of severe socio-economic problems (e.g. illegal migration or smuggling) for the neighbors.

As for the ‘cultural component’ of the ‘soft’ power the attractiveness of Russian ‘high’ culture is world-wide recognized and it is highly respected by the countries of the South Caucasian region. For example, cultural exchanges between Russia and three Trans-Caucasian countries tend to grow. The Russian higher education system is still attractive for students from this region because the Russian universities are still able to provide foreign students with good training both in the ‘hard’ sciences and humanities.

Political values are one more key ‘soft’ power’s component. As assumed by Nye, soft power increases “when a country’s culture includes universal values and its policies promote values and interests that others share”.¹⁵ An attractive domestic model can be another potential value-based ‘soft power’ resource. As follows from the Russian official documents, Moscow has an ambition not only to promote universal values (such as prevention of radicalism and extremism as well as protection of children rights) but also to export the Russian traditions of inter-ethnic and inter-religious tolerance and multiculturalism.

The attractive foreign policy of a country is a valuable asset for the ‘soft power’ strategy as well. In addition to Russia’s traditionally friendly relations with Armenia, over the last several years Moscow tried to further improve its relations with Azerbaijan as well as to ‘repair’ its complicated bilateral ties with Georgia after the 2012 electoral victory of the anti-Saakashvili coalition. The 2009 Medvedev’s European Security Treaty proposal had a ‘Trans-Caucasian dimension’ with the aim to strengthen the regional security system.¹⁶

5.2. Institutions and Mechanisms.

The process of the Russian ‘soft’ power’s institutionalization has started even before the term itself became a part of the official vocabulary. In 2007, the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) Foundation was established by a presidential decree (although with the NGO status). The Foundation’s main function is to promote

¹⁴ Ernst and Young, *Rapid-growth markets soft power index*, Spring 2012.

¹⁵ Nye, *Soft Power*, 11.

¹⁶ Sergunin A., “Towards a Pan-European Security System? Notions on the Russian Draft of the European Security Treaty,” *Freedom, Security, Justice - Common Interests in the Baltic Sea Region*, (Helsinki: STETE, 2010), 33-40.

the Russian language, culture and education system abroad. *Russkiy Mir* has its centers in Armenia and Azerbaijan (<http://www.russkiymir.ru/russkiymir/ru/rucenter/catalogue.jsp?pager.offset=0&pageIndex=1&pageSize=30>). The Foundation nominates the best teachers and students of the Russian language and culture for the position of ‘Professor of the *Russkiy Mir*’ and ‘Student of the *Russkiy Mir*’. It also has fellowship and internship programs for foreign scholars and students to be hosted in Russia. The Foundation organizes various conferences, competitions and Olympiads on the regular basis.

In 2008, the *Rossotrudnichestvo*, Federal Agency for the CIS, Compatriots Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation, was established with nearly the same purposes as the *Russkiy Mir* but with the governmental status and being subordinated to the Foreign Ministry. As the then President Medvedev put it, the Agency was to become “the key instrument of the so-called soft power”.¹⁷

In addition to these two main institutions, a number of (state-affiliated) NGOs, such as the Gorchakov Foundation for Public Diplomacy, Andrei Pervozvanny Fund, International Council of Russian Compatriots, Library ‘Russian-language literature abroad’, International Association of Twin Cities, etc. partake in the ‘soft power’ activities.

The Russian higher education system gradually builds-up its ‘soft power’ potential as it is increasingly becoming internationalized *via* the introduction of the Bologna Process and increasing the state quota for foreign students to be trained in Russian universities. The state-funded ‘slots’ are distributed among foreigners through both the Russian embassies abroad and leading Russian universities independently. The Russian universities (particularly, from the southern part of the country) have numerous cooperative programs with partner universities in Armenia and Azerbaijan, including joint undergraduate and graduate programs and research projects. There is also a direct cooperative agreement between Russian and Georgian Orthodox universities.

5.3. The Limits and Constraints of Russia’s ‘Soft’ Power.

The South Caucasian countries (even Armenia) are quite suspicious about Moscow’s ‘soft power’ policies in the region. Both the policy-oriented and research literature is replete with critical assessments of the Russian ‘soft power’ strategies in the region. The complaint list includes creation, maintenance and support of Kremlin-friendly networks of influence in the cultural, economic and political sectors, dissemination of the biased information, local agenda-setting through the Russia-

¹⁷ *Soveschanie rukovoditelei predstavitel'stv Rossotrudnichestva za rubezhom, 2012* [The meeting of the heads of the *Rossotrudnichestvo*'s representative offices abroad, 2012], (Accessed February 14, 2013), <http://www.government.ru/stens/20531/>.

state-controlled media, making the ethnic Russians loyal to Kremlin, etc. Some local experts believe that Russia's main objective is to undermine the statehood of the post-Soviet countries and enhance the sphere of its influence.

Another analyst, believes that "the Kremlin is seeking to exploit the Western concept of "soft power"...reframing it as a euphemism for coercive policy and economic arm-twisting."¹⁸ The Russian expert Mikhail Troitski, in fact, echoes this observation by saying that the concept of 'soft power' has two meanings – narrow, referred primarily to the attractiveness, and a broader one – the ability to change policy preferences of others.¹⁹ The second meaning, in practical terms, is very close to the notion of the 'hard' power.

Going to the specific areas of the Russian 'soft power' policies in the Trans-Caucasus, for example, Moscow's economic strategies were critically evaluated by the regional actors. For instance, Russia's energy potential was perceived only as 'energy weapons', i.e. a 'hard' rather than 'soft' power instrument.

As for the 'cultural dimension' of Russia's 'soft power' policies in South Caucasus, the valuable asset of the Russian 'high' culture is always difficult to instrumentalize for practical purposes. Besides, Russia's rich cultural traditions are often overshadowed by negative perceptions of current political developments in this country.

It should be also noted that in contrast with 'high' culture the current Russian mass culture, lifestyle and media products seem to be less attractive for residents of the Trans-Caucasus, even for Russia's compatriots. The (excessive) presence of Russia-made entertainment and news in the local media is often viewed as a threat to constructing a 'true' national identity.

Regarding the attractiveness of the Russian political values, as many foreign experts maintain, Russia has problems with harmonizing its traditional and internationally recognized democratic values and standards. On the one hand, Konstantin Kosachev, the head of *Rosstrudnichestvo*, assumes that "freedom, democracy, rule of law, social stability and respect for human rights have become 'a consumer basket' of the modern world" but, on the other, he insists that "there are differences in their [values] *individual manifestation* due to national, historical and other specifics." In other words, Moscow finds it difficult to persuade others that it shares universal

¹⁸ Minzarari D, "Soft Power with an Iron Fist: Putin Administration to Change the Face of Russia's Foreign Policy Toward Its Neighbours." *Eurasia Daily Monitor*; (September 10, 2012). Vol. 9, No. 163, (Accessed February 12, 2013). http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=39821.

¹⁹ Troitski M, Russian soft power in the European Union. Conference on "Russian Soft Power: Perspectives and Prospects," *Center for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding*, Warsaw, December 20, 2011.

values and is ready to disseminate them throughout the world. Equally, Russia is unable to make its domestic socio-economic and political model attractive and sell it to other nations. Even Kosachev admits that Russia cannot export its specific model since “it has not developed any such model yet”.²⁰

Moscow is also short of efficient foreign policy tools in the ‘soft power’ domain. None of Russia’s large-scale foreign policy initiatives (including the EST draft) gained a solid international support in South Caucasus.

In its Trans-Caucasian ‘soft power’ activities the Kremlin sometimes does not take into account the ‘local peculiarities’. For example, the three Trans-Caucasian republics still suffer from a sort of ‘inferiority complex’ because the local statehood and identities are not strong enough and still in their formative phase. The very process of state- and identity-building is often based on negative ‘othering’ Russia. In this context, any Russian ‘soft power’ efforts are interpreted as attempts to breach the local statehood, identities and security. Besides, Russia is blamed for having a ‘hidden plan’ to reintegrate the Trans-Caucasian countries in its sphere of influence.

To continue the analysis of Russia’s ‘soft’ power’s shortcomings, it should be noted that Moscow’s instruments in this field are predominantly ‘statist’, i.e. government-based and controlled. The NGO potential and resources are basically not in demand. The NGOs that are ‘officially’ allowed to participate in the ‘soft power’ activities, in reality are semi-governmental and perceived by the ‘target audiences’ in the region accordingly.

Moscow often tends to forget what Nye wrote about the interaction between the government and non-government sectors in the ‘soft power’ sphere: governments should “make sure that their own actions and policies reinforce rather than undercut their soft power.”²¹ On a number of occasions the Kremlin undercut what was done by Russian regions, municipalities, private companies, universities and NGOs to promote the Russian-Trans-Caucasian cooperation in the economic and humanitarian spheres and consequently undermined its ‘soft’ power in the region.

The lack of transparency (and its natural ‘satellite’ – corruption) is one more grave shortcoming of Russia’s ‘soft power’ policies. Moscow’s ‘soft power’ initiatives are often oriented either to the relatively narrow circles of local political elites or to the certain (pro-Kremlin) part of the Russian communities in the EaP region which is ironically called ‘professional compatriots’.

²⁰ Kosachev K., “The Specifics of Russian Soft Power,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, (October 7, 2012). (Accessed February 14, 2013), <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/The-Specifics-of-Russian-Soft-Power-15683>.

²¹ Nye, *Soft Power*, 17.

Duplication is another problem of the Russian ‘soft power’ policies in the Trans-Caucasus. For example, there is a lack of clear division of labor between the *Ros-sotrudnichestvo* and *Russkiy Mir*; their partners in the region were often puzzled by rather chaotic activities of these two Russia’s leading ‘soft power’ agencies.

To sum up, the Russian understanding of ‘soft power’ strongly deviates from either the ‘classic’ one (Nye-based) or suggested by Western practitioners. The Russian interpretation of ‘soft’ power is rather pragmatic and interest-centric. For example, the draft of a new Russian Foreign Policy Concept (December 2012) defines the ‘soft’ power as a ‘set of instruments’ which is helpful in achieving foreign policy aims by means of civil society institutions, ITs and communication, humanitarian and other methods that are different from classical diplomacy.²² President Putin was even more pragmatic and instrumentalist by defining the ‘soft’ power as a mere foreign policy tool or technology that helps either to lobby Moscow’s interests in foreign countries or improve Russia’s international image.²³

To conclude, the above-mentioned shortcomings make the Russian ‘soft power’ policies in the Trans-Caucasus less efficient and sometime undercut the whole Kremlin’s ‘grand strategy’ in the region.

6. IN LIEU OF CONCLUSION: WHAT COULD BE DONE?

Having in mind that the EaP is only an element (and not the most important one) of the EU-Russian relations, first, the major barriers to bilateral cooperation should be removed. Among these barriers the lack of a proper legal basis for the bilateral relations (no new strategic partnership agreement to date), the lack of substantial progress in the EU-Russia energy dialogue, slow progress in implementing Common Spaces concept (especially Common Space on External Security), etc. should be mentioned. Without doing this, the EU-Russia cooperation on the EaP will be sluggish or limited.

However, even in the current situation some opportunities for a more intense cooperation are available: For instance, focus can be changed from national to subnational level: Brussels and Moscow can encourage the border regions and municipalities of the EaP partner countries and Russia to cooperate. The experiences of the Euro-regions and city-twinning in Europe could be helpful.

²² Putin V. The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. Approved by the President of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin on 12 February 2013. (Accessed on March 3, 2013), http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/Brp_4.nsf/arh/6D84DDEDEDBF7DA644257B160051BF7F?OpenDocument

²³ Putin V., Ukaz Prezidenta RF ot 7 Maya 2012 No. 605; Putin V, *Vystuplenie na soveschanii poslov i postoyannykh predstavitelei Rossii*, 9 Iulya 2012 [Speech at the meeting of Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives, July 9, 2012], (Accessed February 12, 2013), <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/15902> (in Russian).

Most of the EaP *multilateral platforms* (democracy, good governance and stability; economic integration and convergence with EU policies; contacts between people) and *flagship initiatives* (border management program; integration of electricity markets, energy efficiency and renewable; SME development; response to disasters; good environment governance) could be linked to the similar EU-Russian programs (*via* joint training, seminars, exchanges, etc.).

The EaP flagship initiative on the Southern energy supply corridor could become a subject for joint discussions (and probably cooperation) with Russia rather than conflict.

The EU could remove one of Moscow's major concerns about the EaP (that some partner countries may be put on a 'fast track' and go faster than Russia in integration with the EU) by synchronizing and harmonizing cooperation with these countries in areas such economy, trade, customs, investment, visa regime facilitation, etc.

The EU, Russia and EaP partner countries should start their dialogue from searching common points that unite rather than divide them. The same is true for individual countries: for example, cross-border cooperative initiatives could be first launched between Russian and EaP neighboring regions.

A series of 'trilateral' (EU, Russia, EaP countries) expert seminars to discuss mutual perceptions and approaches to the EaP could be helpful. A number of joint (multi-lateral) research projects on the EaP under the auspices of, say, national academies of science could be initiated.

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