

SOFT POWER, REGIONALISM AND COMMON NEIGHBORHOODS: RUSSIA'S POTENTIAL IN A COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENT

Yumuşak Güç, Bölgeselcilik ve Komşuluk İlişkileri:
Rekabetçi Bir Ortamda Rusya'nın Potansiyeli

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Abstract:

This paper argues that soft power becomes an indispensable component of Russia's policies toward its southern neighbors. The author addresses the conceptual and practical dimensions of soft power instrumentalization by the Russian diplomacy. He claims that soft power can be applied not only within bilateral relations between Russia and its individual partners, but also as a tool of more regionally-oriented policies. In this context such regional frameworks with different degrees of institutionalization as the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea regions, Central Asia and the Caucasus are discussed. The paper concludes by stating that Russia's soft power projection inevitably develops in competition with soft power projects launched by other major actors in Eurasia, including Turkey and the European Union.

Keywords: *Soft power, regionalism, neighborhood policy*

Öz:

Bu makale Rusya'nın güney komşularına yönelik politikalarında yumuşak gücünün vazgeçilmez bir unsur haline geldiğini ileri sürmektedir. Makale yumuşak güç araçsallaştırılmasının Rus diplomasisi tarafından kavramsal ve uygulanabilir boyutlarını ele almaya çalışmakta ve yumuşak güç olgusunun sadece Rusya'nın ortakları ile ikili ilişkilerinde değil, aynı zamanda bölgesel amaçlı politikalarında da bir araç olarak kullanılabileceğini ileri sürmektedir. Bu bağlamda makalede Karadeniz ve Hazar Denizi bölgesi ile Orta Asya ve Kafkaslar gibi farklı kurumsallaşma derecelerine sahip bölgeler de tartışılmaktadır. Son olarak makale Rusya'nın Avrasya'ya yönelik yumuşak güç planlarının, AB ve Türkiye gibi diğer bölge aktörlerinin yumuşak güç planlarıyla kaçınılmaz bir rekabete girerek geliştiğini belirtmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Yumuşak güç, bölgesellik, komşuluk politikası*

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of soft power is usually referred to as one of the most important components of states' policies toward each other, grounded in the force of attraction and endearment, as opposed to coercion and projection of either military or economic strength. In the meantime, power in general, and soft power in particular, are concepts rather sensitive to the international structures they are embedded in. With the growing importance of regionalism in a variety of its manifestations – regional economic projects, policy fora, etc. – it is important to find out how the soft power concept works in regional frameworks with their complex combinations of diverse actors and strategies.

In my analysis of the regionalism – soft power nexus I will focus on four possible frameworks applicable for conceptualizing regionalism to the south of Russia's borders. In two of these regional frameworks – the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea regions – Russia is a full-fledged participant and a region-shaper. In two others – South Caucasus and Central Asia – Russia is rather an external – though evidently enormously influential – actor than internal one.

The differences between these two groups of regional formations don't stop here. The Black Sea and the Caspian Sea regions are, along the lines of Barry Buzan's conceptualization,¹ examples of *regional international systems* grounded in either common institutions (like the Black Sea Economic Cooperation), or on a common agenda (negotiations on diving the Caspian Sea into national sectors). Institutions might be weak and ineffective, the negotiating process might be conflictual and troublesome, but they make a group of neighboring countries a region of its own.

In contrast to this, Central Asia and the Caucasus represent what might be called *under-regionalized areas* that lack sufficient intrinsic resources for region-building and are mostly objects of policies of their stronger neighbors. Both might be called “Oriental regions” along the lines of Edward Said's conceptualization of the Orient as an ideational construct largely defined by outsiders. These external descriptions could be rather different and leave much room for semantic flexibility as evidenced by the proliferation of such concepts as “the greater Caucasus”, the “Caspian – Central Asian region” or “the Black Sea – Caspian region”.

These areas could also be viewed as patchwork regions, due to cultural, religious and ethnic mosaics inside them. Many scholars though refer to South Caucasus as a region, even optimistically suggesting its future transformation into an EU-type

¹ Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 114.

“common market.”² Yet political situation on the ground is not conducive to such optimism, since no country seems to wish to anchor itself to a common region: Armenia sees itself as Russia’s ally, while Azerbaijan and Georgia strive for integration in Euro-Atlantic structures with an evident purpose of getting rid of Russian influence. In the words of a local scholar, “we have not learned to think of the Caucasus as a region. We are still looking for outsiders to solve our problems... We have tied our futures to this or that side, to this or that power, and still we are not looking at ourselves as a region.”³

Central Asia gives us another example of an under-regionalized area: it can be treated as a regional unit only from the outside. But it never was a full-fledged region of its own – rather an object of other powers’ ambitions.⁴ Key interests of Central Asian countries lie away from this area, which explains the failure of attempts to create common regional institutions like, for instance, the Central Asian Union.⁵ Central Asian governments are not only interested in encouraging the involvement of foreign powers, but also quite often purposefully build their strategies on balancing between contradictory interests of external centers of influence.⁶

Methodologically, I will base my analysis on constructivist premises. I stem from the assumption that soft power is an intrinsic part of international actors’ international profiles and identities. Soft power is inherently a public narrative-based phenomenon⁷: it is grounded in ideas, discourses and storylines that compete with each other. Arguably, enacting the mechanisms of soft power at regional level is a more demanding challenge than doing so in bilateral (state-to-state) formats, yet the gains also seem to be higher since they might find a wider audience and bring more sustainable outcomes.

² Agalar Abbasbeily, “Kavkaz v Svete Seostrategicheskikh Realiy,” *Obozrevatel’-Observer*, No. 1, (2003).

³ *Forging the future of the Caucasus: the Past 20 years and its lessons*, Post-conference Evaluation Report, (Baku: Caucasus International, Center for Strategic Studies and Turkish Policy Quarterly, 2012), 15.

⁴ Partick Jotun, “Regionalization in Caucasia and Central Asia,” *Regionalization in a Globalizing World. A Comparative Perspective on Forms, Actors and Processes*, ed. Michael Schultz, Frederick Soderbaum and Joakim Ojendak, (London and New York: Zed Books, 2001), 102.

⁵ A.Kurtov, “Real’na li Ugroza Geopoliticheskogo Razloma v Tsentral’noi Azii?,” *Obozrevatel’-Observer*, No. 9, (1998).

⁶ Andrey Kazantsev, “Mnogovektornost’ Vneshney Politiki i Geopoliticheskaya Neopredelionnost’ v Tsentral’noi Azii,” *Vestnik Instituta Kennana v Rossii*, No. 19, (2011), 20-22.

⁷ Margaret Somers and Gloria Gibson, “Reclaiming the Epistemological “Other”: Narrative and the Social Constitution of Identity,” *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Craig Calhoun Malden, (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 37-99.

1. SOFT POWER: REGIONAL REPERCUSSIONS OF THE CONCEPT

Power is the key concept in studying international relations from a variety of theoretical perspectives. The interest to its soft facets is due to the fact that there are not so many convincing examples of hard power (one based on military force or economic pressure) bringing desired results. With the international society fabric becoming a more complex conglomerate of actors, institutions and norms, the pursuance of actors' interests can succeed mainly within communicative and discursive frameworks.

The concept of soft power elucidates the importance of immaterial policy tools (like the role of ideas, the power of attractive symbols, etc.), as opposed to physical and material instruments, including economic and military ones. The notion of soft power, which to a significant extent encompasses the idea of public diplomacy, goes much farther and embeds not only technical tools of either influencing or manipulating the policy-making machinery and public opinion in targeted countries, but also contains a strong normative potential which is unimaginable without an identification with certain political values. Indeed, soft power presupposes a value-laden identity framework capable of setting certain standards of social and political behavior, mostly based on externalizing successful domestic norms and projecting them beyond national borders.

Against this background power may be seen not merely as an image-making tool⁸ manipulated by the states, but a system of relations they build with their international interlocutors. In a Foucauldian way, one may argue that power constitutes a web of relations that forms/makes/constructs political subjects by means of communication management and information sharing, performed by the state in conjunction with multiple actors (business corporations, foundations, the media, sub-national authorities, NGOs, artist groups, etc.). Such a view is pertinent to a liberal perspective on international relations with its focus on normative connotations of power which in the case of the EU are articulated by means of civilian power tools, neighborhood policies, normative appeal, and multilateralism. The EU seems to be a good example of this conceptualization of power: it relies on a combination of "institutional power" (which rests upon decisional rules, the shared understanding of responsibility and interdependence, etc.) and "productive power" (i.e. that one producing social identities by means of discourses and meanings). In contrast, Russia trusts in a more traditional "compulsory power" which consists of the direct control over the policies of its "junior partners", including economic sanctions, manipulation with energy price, application of military force, and so forth.

⁸ Dmitry Zamiatin, "Obraz Strany: Struktura i Dynamika," *Obschestvennye Nauki i Sovremennost*, No. 1, (2001), 107-112.

The concept of soft power which is central to my analysis contains a set of key characteristics. Firstly, it is explicitly *structural* type of power, as opposed to unilateral display of country's cultural potential in the framework of public diplomacy. Secondly, soft power effectively works only as an *inter-subjective* construct. This means that there should be a demand for soft power projection in partner countries, or this demand has to be incited. Thirdly, soft power contains indispensable *normative* components as exemplified by certain principles, rules and procedures that ultimately are expected to be shared by all parties in communication. Fourthly, soft power necessarily involves *institutional* dimension, since it strengthens practices of multilateralism on the basis of a variety of communicative platforms with different interlocutors. Fifthly, soft power can imply *disciplinary* mechanisms bound to change / correct behavior of other countries by engaging them in a common normative space.

Soft power is an ideational and perceptual phenomenon possessing strong institutional potential: it is more about ideas than about material assets, and it depends upon acceptance or rejection of those ideas in a wider regional milieu. In the meantime, soft power can be viewed as a key element of mechanisms of hegemony understood as an expression of broadly based consensus manifest in the acceptance of ideas, supported by material resources and institutions.⁹ Hegemony in this context connotes a consensual order based on shared values, expectations, perceptions and understandings. It is a "rule by consent, or the cultural and intellectual leadership". In this sense it is the opposite of domination based on preponderance of material resources (energy and military power in the case of Russia).

In this paper, I will single out two most important dimensions in Russia's soft power in its southern neighborhood. The first one is *ideational*: soft power always presupposes a discursive battle for the dominating storyline about long-term regional imagery. Soft power includes offering and publicly discussing models of region-building prospects, alternative scenarios of regional development, and ultimately - the visions shaping the future. Soft power is objectified in bilateral or multilateral agenda setting through infusion of ideas in public debate.

The second dimension of soft power is *institutional*, as exemplified by mechanisms of engagement and association with elites and societies. The institutional outlook at soft power requires understanding how discourses are reified in specific communicative practices, and whether the entire communicative process brings any fruits.

⁹ Adam D. Morton, "Social Forces in the Struggle Over Hegemony: Neo-Gramscian Perspectives in International Political Economy," *Rethinking Gramsci*, ed. Marcus Green, (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 150.

2. IDEATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF RUSSIA'S SOFT POWER

There is a widely spread opinion that Russian foreign policy thinking is dominated by geopolitics and hard security considerations, and the Kremlin misinterprets the very idea of soft power.¹⁰ Indeed, in the traditions of the Soviet mentality, the Kremlin views soft power as a “Western invention,” or even as an element of what in the Cold War times was dubbed “ideological warfare” to which the Kremlin has to symmetrically respond by launching propagandistic cover-up actions.¹¹

Yet in spite of the combination of the Soviet-inherited instincts and the technocratic nature of the ruling regime, Moscow does use normative arguments as its soft power tools. From the ideational perspective, soft power ought to be analyzed as part of politically instrumentalizable concepts constitutive for country's foreign policy. I will base my further analysis on two key premises. First, soft power implies the ability to contrive a vision of region's future appealing for local actors, including the sources of coherence within region, its identity profile and policy agenda. Second, soft power presupposes the ability to chart region's wider international perspectives and relate regional narratives to the global ones. It is through these two criteria that I shall assess Russia's potential in soft power projection.

2.1. Russia's Regional Approaches

Most of Russian policy experts would agree that it is normative issues that affect the logic of region-building worldwide. They see regionalism as shaped by immaterial factors (perceptions, narratives, anticipations, role identities, etc.), and some successful region-building projects came into being as results of creative imagination and its institutionalization.

Yet in practice the only idea Russia is consistently promoting in its “near abroad” is “finding regional solutions for regional problems” which indeed resonates in some countries like, for example, Iran. But this approach is far from sufficient for region-building, since it is short of content and substance, is mostly defensive and reactive, and grounded in geopolitical thinking aimed against the expansion of the transatlantic community. In particular, Russian experts complained that the United States used environmental programs to boost its influence in the Caspian Sea region.¹² Some Russian commentators treat the division of the Caspian Sea in

¹⁰ Jakub Koreiba, “Miekkka Sila Twardoglowej Dyplomacji,” *Nowa Europa Wschodnia*, Dwumiesiecznic Poswiecony Europie Wschodniej i Azji Centralnej. Krakow: (January 2013), http://www.new.org.pl/2013-01-13,miekkka_sila_twardoglowej_dyplomacji.html

¹¹ Sergey Vostrikov, “Karabakhskiy Krizis i Politika Rossii na Kavkaze,” *Obschestvennye Nauki i Sovremennost*, No. 3, (1999), 85.

¹² Anatoly Greshnevikov, “Voprosy Natsional'noi Bezopasnosti Rossii v Kaspiyskom Regione,” *Natsional'nie Interesy*, No. 1, (2001).

national sectors as a move facilitating the operation of Western oil companies in the region of US/NATO interests.¹³ “The Greater Black Sea region” (or “the Black Sea - Mediterranean region”) are viewed with particular suspicion in Moscow as regional platforms aimed at more forcefully linking the vast Euro-Asian areas to the West, strengthening the pivotal security roles played by NATO and the EU in its southern and eastern peripheries, and securing energy transportation routes essential for the West. The alleged “Caspian-Black Sea region” is seen as part of the US-promoted idea of a “greater Middle East” stretching from Palestine to Pakistan. It is perceived in Moscow as an attempt to detach the Central Asian countries from the putative Russian sphere of influence and to substantiate their historically contingent inclusion in the USSR. The concept of a wider Baltic-Black Sea region, known as Intermarun, is also believed to contain elements of separating Russia from neighboring countries.

There are two main problems with the “regional solutions for regional problems” formula. First, it might have some practical significance for the Caspian Sea regionalism that basically is about dividing energy resources among the five littoral states, but in other cases it loses its appeal. For example, about one half of the Black Sea Cooperation Organization members are not, geographically speaking, littoral states of the Black Sea. Even more problematic the appeal to “regional solutions” might look in South Caucasus and Central Asia where it is Russia itself that is often seen as an external – and not necessarily constructive - actor.

Second, Russia won't be able to have a monopoly in neither of the region in its southern neighborhood, and has to accept that other major powers – EU, US, China, and Turkey – will be increasingly competing for influence. Russia's resources of integration are insufficient for materializing its leadership ambitions, yet it is the fear of Russian domination among other littoral states that ultimately paves the way to external overlays.

It seems that the Kremlin, instead of developing and offering its visions of the different models of regionalism, prefers to think more in terms of civilizational – rather than regional – paradigm. Some Russian authors speak about “regional or local civilizations.”¹⁴ Yet the very concept of civilization comes in Russia in different versions – either as Russia's belongingness to a wider European civilization, or as Russia's domination in a Slavic civilization. Both versions don't work for Russia's relations with its southern neighbors – not only because they are evidently excluded from either of these two civilizational narratives, but also because each of them is semantically defined by Russia's uneasy relations with the West rather than with its immediate neighbors.¹⁵

¹³ Ali Magomedov, “Geopoliticheskie Interesy S.Sh.A. v Zakavkazie,” *Obozrevatel'-Observer*, No. 11, (2009), 89-93.

¹⁴ Elena Amelina, “Poniatie Tsivilizatsii Vchera i Segodnia,” *Obschestvennie Nauki i Sovremennost*, No.2, (1992), 100.

¹⁵ Igor Zevelev, “Rossiya i Russkiy Mir,” Moscow: “Russia-2020” Project, <http://russia-2020.org/>

A more appropriate for Russia's policies in the south derivative of the civilization-based discourse is the "Russian world" concept, which for the Kremlin and the "Russkiy Mir" Foundation serves as a tool for projecting Russia's cultural and political influence in countries with sizeable segments of Russian-speakers. Yet it is not rare that Russian-speakers in neighboring countries culturally define themselves in rather complex and hybrid ways, and are reluctant to voluntarily associate themselves with the Kremlin-promoted idea of Russianness. Moscow very often lacks proper cognizance of how the Russian-speaking communities are organized and to what extent they are integrated in local social and cultural milieu. The concept of the "Russian world", as most of derivatives of civilizational approach practiced by Russia, is instrumentalized as universal policy tool,¹⁶ but is largely insensitive to regional specificities.

Besides, the civilizational discourse, designed as a soft power connector, turns into a vast container of the most parochial and extremely mythologized perceptions of Russia's Self.¹⁷ It often is undistinguishable from imperial momentum: "the sense of special mission towards other nations is a deep tradition in Russia's intellectual history."¹⁸ Moreover, the very concept of Russian compatriots living abroad can become an instrument for Russia's force projection (in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria), which may question its soft power nature. Russia indeed uses such instruments as the disbursement of Russian passports to the citizens of separatist territories, along with the purchasing of real estate, increased Russian language-learning in schools, etc.,¹⁹ but against the backdrop of endemic conflicts these moves might be conducive to securitization of Russia's policies and the justification for Russia's hard power application. Needless to say that these policies are overwhelmingly rejected by Russia's southern neighbors.

Despite the strong peace-keeping ingredients of the idea of civilizational dialogue, there is a widely spread feeling in the West that Russia is disinterested in solving "frozen conflicts" and even takes advantage of some of them for the sake of maintaining its otherwise vanishing geopolitical influence. This is a key source of disagreements in Russia's relations with the EU, but it also constitutes a problem for Russia in the Caucasus, since such an approach alienates it from Georgia and Azerbaijan, and hardly brings practical results in relations with Armenia.

ru/2010/07/15/russia-and-russian-world/

¹⁶ Boris Erasov, "Rossiya v Evraziyskom Prostranstve," *Obschestvennie Nauki i Sovremennost*, No. 2, (1994), 64-65.

¹⁷ Sergei Medvedev, "Russia at the End of Modernity: Foreign Policy, Security, Identity," *Russia and the West at the Millenium*, ed. Sergei Medvedev, Alexander Kononov and Sergei Oznobischev, (Garmisch – Patternkirchen: George Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2003), 33-54.

¹⁸ Alexander Bogomolov and Oleksandr Lytvynenko, "A Ghost in the Mirror: Russian Soft Power in Ukraine," London: Chatham House Briefing Paper, REP RSP BP (January 2012), 7.

¹⁹ *Soft Power? The Means and Ends of Russian Influence*, London: Chatham House REP Seminar Report, (March 31, 2011), 17.

2.2. Russia and Global Debates on Democracy

Russia tried to imitate Western countries in grounding its soft power strategy in a pro-democracy rhetoric. In particular, “the target of the Russian soft power vis-a-vis Georgia since the war has largely been the West. The aim has been to blacken the Georgian government’s name and undermine the Georgian narrative of events.”²⁰ However, the invectives against “undemocratic features” of the Saakashvili regime were soon dropped, since this type of discourse could only harm the Kremlin itself. It overtly betrayed Russia’s double standards: Moscow never raised the issue of democratic governance in other neighboring countries and, moreover, indirectly supported authoritarian practices in many of them.

Yet Kremlin didn’t abandon the concept of democracy as a soft power tool – it transferred it to focus on the structure of international relations. This is how the idea of democratic multipolarity unfolded. Kremlin is keen to resort to this discourse in communicating with political elites in countries that have positioned themselves as alternatives to the domination of the West, including China, Iran, and Turkey. Since Russia has to somehow attune its international narratives to the political ideologies of the non-Western world, some of its discourses converge with post-colonial resistance to the domination of the West and the longing for more equitable international relations.

Yet this discourse, in its capacity of a soft power tool, does not resonate in Russia’s southern neighborhood for at least two reasons. First, the local elites take it as part of an old realist approach concealing Russia’s claims for legitimizing its regional preponderance. Second, Russia sometimes tends to overrate the anti-Western attitudes among its southern neighbors. Some of them make important – though inconsistent – moves to integrating with the Western normative order through accepting the Eastern Partnership principles and joining global initiatives aimed at promoting economic transparency and financial accountability (for example, Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative in which dozens of oil- and gas-producing and transporting countries, like Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, have taken part).

3. INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSIONS OF SOFT POWER

As I noted above, Russia recognized the importance of soft power as a — perhaps auxiliary and facultative — ingredient of its diplomatic arsenal. This acceptance by itself is a serious step forward, especially against the background of the heavy legacy of the overwhelmingly materialist and technocratic thinking that dominates in the Kremlin. Konstantin Kosachev, the head of “Rossotrudnichestvo” (an agency subordinated to Foreign Ministry), not only accepts the legitimacy

²⁰ *Soft Power? The Means and Ends of Russian Influence*, 16.

of soft power tools in world politics, but tries to instrumentalize this concept. His blog posts, which intentionally feature as informal means of communication, often contain references to Putin's speeches, which can be interpreted as a means of linking President's discourse of alleged national revival to a more open and flexible understanding of public and cultural diplomacy as elements of soft power techniques.

Yet Russian diplomatic missions in neighboring countries which are supposed to be the main vehicles for soft power promotion are often criticized for working mainly with rather active yet not influential groups of Russian-speakers, and ignoring the most educated and dynamic social groups. To reach them, traditional PR tools – like festivals with “Russian pancakes, wooden spoons and bears”²¹ – look outdated.

Russia seeks to get positive feedback from — and thus exercise influence among — post-Soviet elites, utilizing multiple references to their “common history” and shared – yet bygone-Soviet pedigree. As a recent study assumes, Moscow has worked to consolidate its influence in the post-Soviet area through a number of soft power channels: attractive visa-free travel policy, the rhetoric of fraternity, and the ubiquity of Russian media in most CIS countries.²² Yet soft power is effective only if its application generates and spreads positive social impulses and meanings. It is undeniable that the Russian labor market can be economically appealing to low-paid migrants from post-Soviet states, yet what counts is not the quantity of immigrants and the volume of their remittances, but the qualitative characteristics of their experiences in Russia, which certainly include intolerance and extreme nationalism. The public attitudes towards immigrants all across Russia are characterized by estrangement, alienation, and enmity, which obviously does not create fertile ground for soft power projection. The fraternity narrative is very much past-oriented, lacks political dynamics, and thus fails to produce a convincing long-term vision of a common future. As for the Russian media beyond the Russian borders, it mainly translates commercial entertainment products and lacks strong political messages. Even if these messages become discernible, many of them are perceived as derogatory by neighboring countries that are too often depicted by Russian journalists and showmen as unstable and insolvent trouble-makers.

Moreover, soft power in Russia is often substituted by PR methods (purchasing

²¹ Anastasia Mitrofanova, “Rabota Rossiiskikh Posolstv s Sootechestvennikami – Bliny, Lozhki i Medvedi,” Interview to Regnum Agency, (January 22, 2013), <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1615802.html>

²² Nicu Popescu and Andrew Wilson, *The Limits of Enlargement-Lite: European and Russian Power in the Troubled Neighbourhood*, London: European Council on Foreign Relations, ECFR Policy Report, (June 2009), 3–4.

space in international media, hiring foreign consultants for improving corporate image,²³ or establishing institutions like Caucasian Institute for Democracy²⁴). These measures lack due interactivity and represent one-channeled way of communicating with Russia's partners. The Kremlin reduces soft power "to a platform for spreading propaganda and focus most of all on loyal constituencies like compatriots living abroad... Instead of winning people over who do not share Russia's foreign principles, Moscow seeks to mobilize those who already agree with them."²⁵

4. A COMPETITION FOR SOFT POWER?

As I have argued earlier, in its southern neighborhood Russia faces competition from at least two other sources of soft power which are the EU and Turkey. In this section I will dwell upon their competitive advantages and disadvantages vis-à-vis Russia.

For the EU, regionalism in post-Soviet Eurasia is important in terms of overcoming exclusionary components of its neighborhood policies and find solutions that would associate Eurasian countries with the EU without membership. The essence of the EU soft power is in projecting the normative experiences of regional integration within Europe to its periphery. In fact, through a mosaic of dialogues and multilateral cooperation mechanisms, the EU can promote shared governance structures to consist of concentric circles—from those neighbors which accept the *acquis communautaire* to those partners with whom legal harmonization and convergence have to be negotiated.

The whole gamut of soft power issues — including the role of identities, norms, and values - increasingly shapes the EU's relations with its eastern neighbors. In doing so, Brussels wishes to transform its partners not by means of political power, but by force of attraction.²⁶ "The EU has next to no 'power over' anything at all – not even, in fact, proper power over its own constituent units – yet it evidently has a considerable amount of 'power too.'²⁷ In this light, the EU is sympathetic to the concept of soft power as "the ability to shape the future."²⁸

²³ Robert Orttung, "Russia's Use of PR as a Foreign Policy Tool," *Russian Analytical Digest* 81/10, (June 16, 2010), 7-10.

²⁴ Nicu Popescu, *Ibid*, 2.

²⁵ Jaroslaw Cwiek-Karpowicz, *Limits to Russian Soft Power in the Post-Soviet Area*, (Berlin: DGAPanalyse), No. 8, (July 2012), 9.

²⁶ Yannis Stavrakakis, "Passions of Identification: Discourse, Enjoyment, and European Identity". *Discourse Theory in European Politics. Identity, Policy and Governance*, ed. David Howarth and Jacob Torfing. (Palgrave & Macmillan, 2005), 154.

²⁷ Erik Ringmar, "Empowerment Among Nations. A Sociological Perspective," *Power in World Politics*, ed. Felix Berenskoetter and M.J. Williams, (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 202.

²⁸ John Gaventa, "Levels, Spaces and Forms of Power: Analysing Opportunities for Change,"

The importance of soft power for the EU rests on the assumption that should the EU lower its engagement with – and expectations regarding – post-Soviet states, it would “eat away its own legitimacy as an international actor.”²⁹ Therefore, the very transformation of the common EU – Russia neighborhood area is perceived as an issue touching upon not only the EU external capabilities, but also the EU identity as a source of normative inspiration and an engine of change for adjacent countries. Within this perceptual framework, some European experts explore the prospects of “bi-regional relations, or inter-regionalism”³⁰ as a major element of EU policy of supporting connections between Baltic and Caucasian countries.

This explains why normatively loaded issues are at the very top of EU’s soft power agenda. Perhaps, Georgia is the most receptive to the narrative of Europeanization: its President Saakashvili not only compares this country with Estonia and Switzerland, but claims that the issue of the EU membership can eventually be part of Tbilisi’s relations with Brussels. In spite of certain naivety of these expectations, the legal approximation process does take place, being focused on a set of EU-defined propriety areas – eliminating trade barriers, introducing sanitary norms in agriculture, fostering competition policy and securing intellectual property rights.³¹

In the meantime, the EU vision of regionalism the Black Sea, South Caucasus, the Caspian Sea and Central Asia is not short of rather pragmatic tones. These regions are usually portrayed as interrelated components of project chains in emerging energy and transportation networks. They can be viewed as a transit and security regions, in which the EU intends to promote a model of safe and democratic neighborhood. Along these lines, the EU portrays itself as a driver for procedural and technical changes that brings countries of these regional groupings closer to the EU. The EU is also keen on sharing its expertise and resources for contributing to solving domestic problems (for instance, from the Baltic Sea region to the South Caucasus).

In the EU discourse Russia is usually described as an extra-regional actor taking advantage of the EU weakness for the sake of prolonging the status quo and its control over the region. The EU often portrays Russia’s North Caucasus as

Power in World Politics, ed. Felix Berenskoetter and M.J. Williams, (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 214.

²⁹ Hiski Haukkala et al. “Contours of External and Internal in EU – Russia Relations,” *Witnessing Change in Contemporary Russia*, ed. Tomi Huttunen and Mikko Ylikangas, Helsinki: Kikumora Publications Series, No. 38, 50.

³⁰ Ramesh Thakur and Luk van Langenhove, “Enhancing Global Governance through Regional Integration,” *Regionalisation and Global Governance. The Taming of Globalisation?*, ed. Andrew Cooper, Christopher Hughes and Philippe Lombaerde, (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 31.

³¹ Thomas de Waal, *Georgia’s Choices: Charting a Future for Georgia in Uncertain Times*, (Moscow: Moscow Carnegie Center, 2011), 50.

a crisis-ridden area that requires enormous funding from the federal budget for security reasons. Russia as a whole is depicted as a country unattractive to its neighbors, including even the break-away territories.³² Against this backdrop, the EU, concomitantly, features as a balancing force offering to Russia's southern neighbors an alternative to the Kremlin's dominance.³³

The Turkish regional imagery is basically focused on the Caspian – Black Sea region which are predominantly perceived within a larger framework of trans-Atlantic commitments. Turkish region-makers would certainly agree to dub the “broader Caspian region” a “global energy power” – an appealing metaphor for inscribing it in a wider set of geo-economic relations and to give floor to extra-regional actors in issues involving security and energy. The idea of “greater Caspian neighborhood” also resonates quite strongly in Turkish diplomatic circles.

Turkey definitely wishes to be recognized as a country belonging to the Caspian (Khazar) world, relying on its exceptional relations with Azerbaijan. The Baku – Ceyhan pipeline route is often referred to as an example of deep trust and mutual support between the two countries sharing common cultural background. Special relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey indeed foster economic projects by decreasing risks and transactional costs. Yet Turkish soft power is not only a matter of ethnic affinity: for Georgia too Turkey is the key security partner. The Turkish diplomacy is especially interested in promoting such political triangles as Turkey – Azerbaijan – Iran and Turkey – Azerbaijan – Georgia, unthinkable without soft power backing.

By the same token, Turkey seems to be sympathetic to the U.S. political support of the legitimacy of bilateral (i.e. between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan) agreements on division of the Caspian Sea bottom even in the absence of a comprehensive agreement between the five littoral states. This is a clear challenge to Russia who deems that no external power can have a legitimate voice in decisions concerning the Caspian Sea resources, and that only solution involving all five regional states can have a force of law.

All this has a lot to do with discussing the concept of the Caucasus as a region to a large extent defined from the outside and lacking in common identity. Some elements of discursively shaping the “broader Caspian region” are quite visible in Turkey's policy discourse. Its construction presupposes that Russia and the EU play the roles of “external Others”: both are partners, but not indispensable elements in the emerging regional infrastructure. While Russia is excluded from regional

³² Dieter Boden, “Uregulirovanie Abkhazskogo i Yugo-osetinskogo Konfliktov: Uroki i Perspektivy,” *Yuzhniy Kavkaz: 20 let nezavisimosti*, (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2012), 142-149.

³³ Stefan Meister, *Recalibrating Germany's and EU's Policy in the South Caucasus*, Berlin: DGAPanalyse, No. 2, (July 2010), 4.

settings mostly by political reasons, Europe is by and large portrayed merely as an association of consumer countries increasingly dependent from external energy supplies.

Turkish discourse attributes the roles of “internal Others” to two other countries. Iran is economically important but politically troublesome, while Armenia is pushed out of the Caspian discourse as the occupier of Nagorno-Karabakh. In this circumstances Russia’s strategy of treating Armenia as its strategic outpost in the Caucasus might be illusory and may come with a high price to pay, as exemplified by Russia’s growing alienation from the regional milieu that develops beyond Russia’s control.

In its soft power discourses Turkey also occasionally uses its imperial legacies which are re-signified as cultural rather than geopolitical assets. A good example could be the restoration of ancient monuments in countries with Turkish cultural background as one of the focal points for Turkey’s soft power projection.

Balancing interests and values is another important point in Turkish soft power agenda. Its focus is not only on a variety of energy projects, but on something more demanding - the prospects of this region’s integration with Euro-Atlantic community. This explains the importance of countries like Azerbaijan and Georgia in Turkish strategy of “opening the Caspian to the West.”³⁴ This strategy is evidently conducive to reducing “Russia’s role in the Caspian energy game.”³⁵

CONCLUSION

As I have argued, regionalism is to a large extent shaped by immaterial factors (perceptions, imaginations, narratives, anticipations, role identities, etc.). This is what soft power is about: managing interdependence, inciting spill-over effects, searching for compromises with partners (win-win situations), and ultimately cementing the intra-regional communication. Foreign policies of many major international actors demonstrate new facets of power in the 21st century, in which the pursuances of economic interests are only achievable within a wider framework of socio-cultural and humanitarian projects.

Within the soft power logic, interdependent are not only countries, but – what is perhaps more important – issue areas. Possession of either military force or extractive resources alone usually does not bring desired results. Oil and gas have to be extracted and transported, which is unthinkable without trans-national and cross-border projects. The application of military force can bring the most negative political implications (as Russia’s diplomatic isolation in the case of recog-

³⁴ Burcu Gultekin Punsman, “A Step Ahead Towards the Stage of Maturation in Azerbaijani-Turkish Relations: the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline,” *Caspian Report*, (October – December 2012), 53.

³⁵ William Hale, “Turkey, Caspian Strategies, and the Economic Cooperation Organization,” *Caspian Report*, (October – December 2012), 116.

nizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia made clear). The Caucasus and the Caspian Sea region give the most convincing examples that there are no hard power solutions for situations involving ethnic conflicts or religious clashes.

This is why spill-over plays crucial role as part of soft power approaches. Investments projects can foster solving security issues. There are always normative repercussions of energy projects, as exemplified by the growing attractiveness of the culture of partnership, sustainability, transparency, social responsibility of business, etc.

My comparative analysis has uncovered significant differences between the three major actors whose soft power potentials have important impacts over the regional formations under consideration. To the south of its borders Moscow faces new types of power mechanisms that emerge as a combination of global governance tools and regional institutions. Russia can't stop these processes even if some of them would challenge Russia's policies. Moreover, Russia will find itself under increased pressure from its neighbors and their global allies: this is, for instance, the case of the role of the Russian troops in separatist regions. Of course, Russia can keep claiming that it is NATO and the EU that are eager to deprive Russia's neighbors of their independence, but the Kremlin's role of the defender of sovereignties definitely won't resonate among either of neighboring – and more distant – countries.

For Russia regionalism is part of (neo)realist conceptualization of major international powers' inclination to form blocs and alliances to serve their geopolitical purposes. There is a widely spread sense in Moscow that major states pursue policies of self-assertiveness and hegemony by means of forging regional alliances – something similar to “the theory of great power orbits”³⁶ which presumes that “smaller countries are hardly able to contrive regional integration and stability on their own.”³⁷ Against this background the Kremlin is traditionally wary of activities of what it dubs «extra-regional actors» in the Caucasus and Central Asia, who allegedly try to detach Russia's neighbors from the Russian sphere of influence and to substantiate their historically contingent inclusion in the USSR.³⁸ External actors' policies are aimed, according to the Kremlin geopolitical narrative, at more forcefully linking the vast Eurasian areas to the West, and substantiating the pivotal roles for NATO and EU in providing security to its southern and eastern peripheries, as well as secure energy transportation routes essential for the West.³⁹ But Moscow evidently can't be the only magnet for the regions of its southern

³⁶ Ronald Yalem, “Theories of Regionalism,” *Regional Politics and World Order*, ed. Richard Falk and Saul Mendlovitz, (San Francisco: W.H.Freeman and Company, 1973), 221-237.

³⁷ George Liska, “Geographic Scope, the Pattern of Integration,” *Regional Politics and World Order*, ed. Richard Falk and Saul Mendlovitz, (San Francisco: W.H.Freeman and Company, 1973), 236.

³⁸ Irina Zviagelskaya, “Meniayushiesia Balansy,” *Svobodnaya Mysl*, No. 11 (1606), 66-67.

³⁹ Oleg Yanitskiy, “Evropeiskie Lidery o Dolgosrochnoi Perspective ES,” *Mir i Politika*, No. 11 (26), (November 2008), 44.

neighborhood. The EU pursues its own policy agenda in the Caucasus and Central Asia, moving from “pro-multilateralism policy to intensified regionalism.”⁴⁰ The EU believes that the most successful experiences of region-making can be considered as models to be potentially replicated in other regions. For example, there were many attempts to geographically extend the positive experience of the Baltic region-building to the south, including the Black Sea and Caucasian countries. The Baltic – Black Sea nexus is especially appealing for countries like Georgia which “has in many respects more in common with the Baltic States than it does with its immediate neighbors.”⁴¹

Turkey is another important actor with its own long-term vision of its neighborhood policies. Russia and Turkey can be partners and even co-makers of the Black Sea regional institutional framework, but their policies certainly diverge in two areas: in the Middle East (and in Syria in particular⁴²) and in energy supply projects. Turkey sees Russia as a country profiting from the Middle East conflicts and – in a wider sense – threatening “the Euro-Atlantic energy security concept which NATO (among others) has been promoting.”⁴³ This only complicates the political landscape in the Turkish – Russian common neighborhood and spur clashes of different visions of regional projects.

Against this backdrop, the challenges Russia faces in its southern neighborhood seem indeed far-reaching. Should Russia ground its soft power discourses in normative issues, including democracy, it will most likely be outperformed by the EU that is a much stronger actor in this domain. In the meantime, in civilization-based approaches it is Turkey that possesses a much more influential appeal all across Russia’s southern neighborhood. Whereas both the EU and Turkey try to narrow gaps between their soft power and hard power policies, Russia seems to utilize soft power tools basically as a means to reducing international repercussions of its hard power-based moves, including the military support for separatist territories of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and (indirectly) Nagorno-Karabakh. The concomitant political commitments that Russia has taken seriously constrain its freedom of maneuver and reduce the effectiveness of Moscow’s soft power policies.

⁴⁰ Sung-Hoon Park, “The Dynamics of Regionalism in the APEC Region: Tendencies, Characteristics, and Policy Issues,” *States, Regions and the Global System. Europe and Northern Asia-Pacific in Globalized Governance*, ed. Andreas Vasilache, Reimund Seidelmann and Jose Luis de Sales Marques, (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2011), 158.

⁴¹ Jonathan Kulick and Temuri Yakobashvili, “Georgia and the Wider Black Sea,” *The Wider Black Sea Region in the 21st Century: Strategic, Economic and Energy Perspectives*, ed. Daniel Hamilton and Gerhard Mangott, (Washington and Vienna: The Johns Hopkins University and Austrian Institute for International Affairs, 2008), 51.

⁴² Nihat Ali Ozcan, “Turkey’s Syria Bargain with Russia,” *Daily News*, (December 6, 2012), 4.

⁴³ Gulmira Rzayeva, “BP-Rosneft Deal: Implications and Intentions,” *Caspian Report*, (October – December 2012), 119.

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