

Russian smart power at work in the Eastern Partnership

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Summary

(1) Results of the following article have been presented during the “IIR Prague - Morning Security Breakfast” in front of Diplomats based in Central Europe and interested in security issues.

(2) The Eastern Partnership (EaP) is an ambitious initiative of the European Union (EU) started in May 2009, governing its relationship with six post-Soviet countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). All countries but Belarus have *de facto*/partially recognized (PR) states on their territories which makes them unable to apply for EU/NATO membership.

(3) Russia’s soft power is relying on Russian language, Orthodoxy, and Soviet nostalgia in a post-Soviet environment. Soviet nostalgia is from far the biggest issue due to the lack of anti-corruption policies and increasing poverty in countries like Moldova and Ukraine.

(4) Russia is militarily active in the region with troops in Transnistria (1992), Abkhazia and South Ossetia (1992), in Crimea (2014), and possibly involved in the Donbas (2015). However, most equipments are going back to Soviet times and professional training is lacking.

(5) The Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are ensuring *status quo* and decreasing the risk of another conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia. Moscow is in charge of the military warehouses in Transnistria and avoiding small arms trafficking. Both the European Union and the United States are asking for Russian troops to leave *de facto*/PR states but are not ready to respond to an emergency situation in which Russia would accept to withdraw.

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Analysis

The European Union (EU) relationship with Eastern Partnership countries (EaP) is at a turning point. On September 24, 2017, 12% of the German voters have decided to give their voices to the Alternative for Deutschland, following the rise of the Front National in France and the 2016 referendum on Brexit in the United Kingdom. More than ever, the EU seems to be weakened by euro-skepticism in the West, but also in the East with the rise of populism and the rightwing Law and Justice party in Poland. While one part of EU citizens are still waiting for a single EU passport with a centralized European Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Armed Forces, the other part is seeking for more national security and protectionism in a globalized world. Some citizens don't expect much results from either levels, having lost confidence in pretty much every political institution.

As a consequence, the EU's geopolitical ambitions in the EaP have decreased in the last few years. It seems that neither pro-Russian Belarus, autocratic Azerbaijan, and even less Armenia who joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in 2015 will become EU and NATO member states in the future. More disturbingly, the three pro-European countries of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia are currently unable to apply for membership because of the *de facto*/partially recognized (PR) states of Transnistria, Eastern Ukraine, Abkhazia and South Ossetia on their territories.

Due to the lack of geopolitical interests from member states and the increasing appeal and voter turnout of populist parties all around Europe, the EaP's financial support and bilateral initiatives is expected to collapse after 2020. However, the EU should not perceive Russia's influence in Eastern Europe as a consequence of its weakness. The strength of Russia's "smart power" was consciously built up from a long term strategy implemented by the Kremlin since the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Russia is not the only threat to the EU in the EaP. China's rising influence with the "One Road, One Belt" initiative is a sufficient opportunity for Eastern European countries to lose interest or discard the prospect of joining the EU and the EEU.

Russian, American, and European experts are unable to determine if China is having military ambitions in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, Chinese soft power has considerably increased. The growing influence of China is a gripping geopolitical topic, and we always have to keep in mind the Chinese factor as it influences both European and Russian policies. Despite this, the following paper focuses on Russia's smart power at work in EaP countries.

The concept of "Smart power" refers to the combination of hard power and soft power strategies. It underscores the necessity of a strong military power but also of investing in beneficiary alliances, partnerships, diplomacy and cultural investments to expand influence. In short, smart power is like a

potent cocktail - a mix between soft and hard, - all about the quest for a perfect combination to make it drinkable and entertaining in the same time.

In order to analyse Russia's military and cultural/diplomatic influence in the EaP region, we will divide this paper in three parts: (1) Hard power with a focus on *de facto*/partially recognized states, (2) Soft power with a focus on culture and Soviet nostalgia, (3) and synchronisation between hard and soft power policies.

From Soviet tanks to Russian peacekeepers

During the Cold War, military power was the Soviet means of controlling a country. The Prague spring ended up in violence, like all other attempts from countries who tried to escape from the Soviet influence.

The USSR is no exception in history and the British and French Empires were also sustained because of strong military power until the decolonization process in the mid-20th Century. From the Egyptian Empire to the war in Afghanistan, always confirms the relevance of hard power to exert power and influence over a territory or population. Moreover, history must not be seen as a series of ruptures. Despite the Second World War most European countries are still involved in violent conflicts. The same is true for the Soviet Union, and it would be naive to think the break-up of the Soviet Union continues to shape or define Russia to the point that it would give up its military influence in post-Soviet space.

Following the fall of the USSR, Moscow has been militarily involved in Moldova (Transnistria), Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia), and North Caucasus. While Russia either offers an explanation about its motives or remains rather evasive on them, its most consistent answer is its pledge to protect Russian citizens, wherever they reside. Such a manifest national and extra-territorial mission to protect doesn't necessarily clash with geopolitical interests, and often one issue eventually reinforces the other. The consequence, however, is the following: more than 1/4 century later, Russian troops are still on the ground to secure Soviet weapons in Transnistria, "ensure peace" (enforce the status-quo) in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and protect civilians in Eastern Ukraine.

Russia's hard power is not as explicit as before, and the Kremlin is grappling to explain and defend its military intervention in post-Soviet space nowadays. If Russia decides to invade countries such as Ukraine or the Baltic States in the future, it would continue to challenge the global world order and may create instability in Russia's neighbourhood.

We should also remember Moscow's weaknesses and shortfalls in terms of military staffing and difficulties of integrating technology into its broad, scattered military apparatus (although since about 2005 Moscow has rapidly invested in defence modernization), and is facing a trend of demographic stressors with a continuously aging and declining population.

Let's assess more deeply some key factors about Russia, namely demographic issues and the outlook of defence and arms industries, and put them in a comparative perspective with other nations.

The Russian population barely amounts to 145 million inhabitants, and is dwarfed by the 505 million in the European Union before Brexit, 320 million in the United-States, and more than 1.4 billion in China. Russia's GDP is similar to Spain (which influences the modernization of its Armed Forces).

The Russian army is also weak compared to the EU (UK, France, Germany, Sweden), US, and Chinese troops. Russia may have recently developed a fully efficient 5th generation aircraft fighter but the US have been flying the F-22 for many years and proving how reliable it is as a US Air Force asset, and the new F-35 has been recently developed. In Syria most Russian aircraft like the Su-24 are outdated and are marked with "Made in USSR."

Small firearms of Soviet-era design like the AK-47/74 cannot compare in efficiency to the superior German-built HK-417/418. Experts who have been on the ground and know the Kalashnikov are aware how inefficient the weapon is in the context of an urban battlefield with small buildings, are heavy to carry for a long time, and produce a lot of distracting loudness compared to other rifles produced in either the United States or Europe. When we speak about the Russian Armed Forces, we should not only consider the quantity of aircraft, tanks, small arms, and even nuclear weapons, but their combined strategic relevance and when they have been produced. A dozen of Su-24 are of no use against a single Swedish Saab Gripen. The same goes for nuclear missiles: its discrete amounts are not important as you can't respond to a single targeted nuclear attack on a military facility by retaliating with a flurry of nukes on a multi-million city.

Russia may still possess an impressive nuclear arsenal (roughly 7000 warheads, the highest reported quantity a state possesses) still, but the overall quality is still lacking. Heads of state of NATO countries should balance their threat perception more with that weakness during talks about the Enhanced Forward Presence, and in the "most vulnerable" reading of the deterrence capabilities in Eastern Europe and *de facto*/PR states.

Looking at the statistics from the Russian Ministry of Defence, we understand Russia is able to fight in small countries in its periphery but certainly cannot sustain a massive invasion and occupation using its land and air forces for a long period. In that context, should we perceived Russia's military presence in the

EaP and *de facto*/PR states as a “second-to-ideal” and politically and militarily less risky strategy to establish buffer zones to protect the Russian Federation from an outside threat? Regarding the situation in places like Transnistria, should we consider Russia as a Hydra-like constant threat to European security? We must avoid the deceptively simplistic idea of a “negative” Russian influence

Does Russia have an interest to invade EaP countries? Judging by the current overall situation we actually see no real interest or substantial motive at the moment. From a political and economic cost-benefit point of view, an invasion and occupation would be too expensive and strategically irrelevant as it may incite and encourage separatist forces across the Russian Federation to antagonize and seek independence from Moscow.

Moscow is fervently against the instalment of additional NATO facilities in its direct neighbourhood, and disapproves of the idea that EaP countries would seek rapprochement to (and possibly want to join) the European Union. The considerations behind such reasoning are obvious: no country would like to have unfriendly, foreign military facilities close to its sovereign borders. NATO facilities are perceived by Russia as a harmful and threatening foreign influence.

The political establishment in Russia is gravely paranoid regarding further EU enlargements. In the Russian perspective, when a country that traditionally belongs to their sphere of influence gyrates towards EU membership, that affects citizens’ mobility because “EU-ized” nationals can’t travel within the CIS like before and cannot move freely due to red tape and visa restrictions. EU integration is diminishing economic opportunities for Russian companies. There is also the matter that NATO countries are generally not keen on placing substantial orders to buy products outside the Alliance of twenty-nine.

Another aspect we have to factor in, is the current dynamic in European defence integration, among which a renewed push for EU-funded financial opportunities (the European Defence Fund) for researching and developing mutual defence assets and enhanced synergies for high-end technological modernization. These evolutions open up the prospect that the European Union could become an enhanced, more developed military power in the future. Avoiding EU enlargement as a driver for better equipped, operationally agile, and resilient EU Armed Forces which may eventually complement NATO facilities, leveraging a combined soft and hard power influence in Russia’s neighbourhood, is also part of Russia’s military doctrine.

These political, strategic, and defence economics aspects affecting Russia’s “reading” of its neighbourhood leads to the following conclusion: Russia is committed to stop NATO and the EU in EaP countries, but

will not go for a direct military intervention to do so. As a consequence, Russia is pursuing means and acts to stop both closer NATO and EU cooperation and enlargement of both organisations, and *de facto*/PR states are the best way to do so. Such territories (Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Eastern Ukraine) currently have not expressed interest in joining the EU or NATO. We won't extend this analysis with Stalin's policy toward minorities, but all *de facto*/PR states have cogent reasons to do not want to be part of their respective EaP countries:

- Transnistria doesn't had/have any interest in joining Moldova as the inhabitants and elites in the territory are predominantly Russian speakers. The reintegration process into Moldova will lead to the impossibility for Transnistrian elites to apply for political position because of the language currently used in Moldova's institutions. Moreover, Transnistria had a population of barely 750,000 inhabitants and 40% of Moldova's industries in 1991 and wanted to keep most part of them inside the territory.
- Abkhazia doesn't want to be reunited with Georgia because of its distinctive identity and culture, but also for economic reasons. Abkhazia was one of the most prosperous territories during the Soviet era with oranges, tourism, tobacco, tomatoes, and impressive infrastructures like the Sukhum/i airport (able to welcome spacecraft, launched from Baikonur, that returned back on Earth). It would have been of no interest for the Northern Abkhazia minorities to assimilate or integrate into Georgia and learn Georgian language.
- South Ossetia is connected to North Ossetia located in Russia. Historically, the Ossetians are commuters used to working in the North and to come back to the Southern part for vacations and retirement. The break-up divided the territory in two parts and it was impossible for the South Ossetians to live in Georgia, disconnected from the Northern part. As a consequence the only option was to somehow be reattached to North Ossetia and consequentially the Russian Federation.
- In Crimea and the Eastern part of Ukraine the reasons are quite similar to other *de facto* states. A large part of Crimea's tourists are coming from Russia, and many Crimean inhabitants have relatives who live in the Federation. Getting closer to the EU would have been harsh for local businesses and travellers who are socio-culturally more in tune with Russia.

Russia's hard power influence over and presence in EaP countries has mostly been possible because of a lack of interest or active involvement by the EU and NATO in culturally disparate territories. However, maintaining a partial political and economic control using *de facto*/PR states is a relative 'low-risk' way to make sure they will never apply for membership to the EU or NATO.

On the other hand, those considerations don't necessarily imply that Russia is on an irreversible, zero-sum collision course with the European security architecture. Hereafter, we argue that Russia's

presence has, paradoxically, kept conflicts in their in a more or less stable ('frozen') state. Russia has indeed been keen to manage the hotspots on its own strengths, with the aim to (a) give the EU and NATO a reason to keep out and (b) .

Russian-Transnistrian relations

In Transnistria, Russia might well pose inconveniences for Moldova and the EU (NATO is not a priority for Chisinau) but the Russians act as a gatekeeper, mitigating security risk factors and 'containing' the situation through peacekeeping operations. After the break-up of the USSR, Transnistria ended up with impressive quantity of small arms in its military facilities. To this day we still don't know the exact quantity of weapon stored next to Bender's fortress. Small arms consist of the easiest calibre and models to export abroad. If the Russian Federation would decide to withdraw from Transnistria, the *de facto* government may endorse the export of these weapons using infrastructures in Odessa to reach consumers in the Middle-East or black market buyers with ties to terrorists. Border guards are easy to corrupt in the area with average salaries of barely 250 EUR/month, and the OSCE and the EUBAM both lack regional capacity to break and dismantle small arms trafficking in the context of a new conflict in Moldova. In that context, Moscow is strategically interested to keep a military influence in the area, but at the same time be perceived by the *de facto*/PR states as the least of all threats.

Russian-Abkhaz relations

A similar situation can be observed in Abkhazia. Depending on which side you are, the Russian troops are illegally on the ground according to Georgia or have legal presence under bilateral agreements signed in Abkhazia. The Russian troops are especially welcomed in Abkhazia, yet the local elites would rather prefer to do not have them. But the day the Kremlin will decide to leave the region, the Georgians will engage militarily to claim back and subdue Abkhazia. In light of the events that occurred in 1992, the war in 2008, and the entrenched political opinion of the ruling class in Tbilissi, it would be naive to imagine Georgia will opt for softening its stance, and revert to a friendlier, more reconciliatory dialogue with Abkhazia. Because that could 'wrongly' signal to Abkhazia a Georgian willingness to revise, perhaps even relinquish some of its claims towards the 'breakaway' region.

The re-integration of Abkhazia is a splitting issue for the future of Georgia, and the government in Tbilissi would be much less motivated to apply for EU and NATO membership if the security situation would "cool off". Whether there is a distinct identity or not in Abkhazia, the UN Security Council permanent members cannot accept a new conflict in Caucasus.

So far, Russian peacekeepers take on the only feasible 'guarantor role' for Abkhazians and Georgians to keep a fragile situation from deteriorating into a new 'hot' conflict. In 2008, the Kremlin was the only state supporting Abkhazia and, in absence of any European country or the US to get involved, stepped in

to mitigate both parties. Agreed, Russia is far from the best option. But the break out of conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians, now nearly 10 years ago, painfully shows that NATO and the EU member states must re-think their approach with regards to *de facto*/PR states.

Russia's involvement in other areas around the Black Sea

In South Ossetia, the power relation and conflict-freezing effect is quite similar to Abkhazia. In Crimea, the Russian intervention is the combination of both strategic interests and support from inhabitants. The so called “hybrid” warfare concept has been developed in Chinese, North-American and European defence and academic circles, but we should remember that the process itself relies on already existing separatism and regional identity. The military intervention, however, is far more direct and difficult to legitimate compared to Transnistria and in the South Caucasus. One strong argument is also Moscow's desire to stabilize an area with military equipment located in the Black Sea region, close to the North Caucasus.

Are the EaP states the instrument for weakening a unitary response of the West in the Moldovan-Transnistrian area, Caucasus and Black Sea region?

In all cases, Russia's military influence is relying on the lack of interest for the EU and NATO. Military equipments used both by the Transnistrians and Russians are not the most sophisticated usually relying on “Made in USSR” weapons. Only a low amount of attack aircraft are stationed in the mentioned areas, and peacekeeping operations act as a means to stabilize the area, and to provide training to local troops, which conveniently increases interoperability.

In this sense, Russia's military doctrine is more defensive in EaP countries than it appears on first sight , and *de facto*/PR states, while becoming subject to a rational calculus, were converted into useful, and relatively manageable ‘securitized hedges’ to serve a common purpose: to protect Russia's strategic and economic interest in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus.

The military presence in the mentioned disputed regional entities is not so strong, for example no S-400, Su-35 or Su-57, or long range missiles in Transnistria or Abkhazia. *De facto*/PR states therefore serve a peculiar, conceptually conflicting, dual purpose:

On one hand they can be seen as “wilful instruments” to deter EU and NATO involvement – hence severely weakening both their soft and hard power options. Yet on the other, these ‘secessionist’ states and areas simultaneously are suitable enablers for a smart, relatively low-risk, and politically affordable answer to reduce the risk horizon (through Russian military presence and political influence). As a result of this

‘unilateral’ pacification and stabilization effort, the EaP states are conditioned into maintaining a *status quo* (which in effect only reduces the fragility ‘on the surface’).

Although they continue to eschew the possibility or proposal to allow other nations to cooperate with them in ‘pacifying’ the security landscape in the EaP countries, the Russian troops are providing their ‘crisis response’, when none are provided by either the OSCE, NATO, or the UN so far. Are we really ready to see Russia out of Transnistria and Abkhazia and to face unpredictable and hard-to-manage consequences? Once again, it would be intellectually naive to imagine Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Eastern Ukraine to naturally seek reattachment to respectively Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. The EU, NATO, and EaP countries have to first provide a concrete and palpable answer if Russia decided to withdraw. These institutions will need to overcome a hard obstacle, which is finding ways for the Kremlin to accept ‘open-ended’ negotiations about the future constellation of these disputed regional entities.

Russian soft power or Soviet nostalgia?

What is Soft power? According to the definition presented by Joseph Nye it is “the ability to attract and co-opt rather than by coercion, using force or giving money as a means of persuasion.” The concept is a fairly new one in IR studies, and measurement is lacking. In his concept, Nye is regrettably missing (1) the cultural parameter, (2) the temporal parameter (attractiveness can change from one government to another) and (3) a regional parameter.

For example, US/EU Soft power may to some extent work in Ukraine, but does it ‘operate’ according to similar dynamics and does it produce understandable outcomes in special places such as Crimea? While one citizen can be highly attracted to one country, to another one it could be unattractive and disinteresting. Contrary to the Hard power – which is cogently measured by certain agreeable, well-defined and widely attributable parameters – Soft power is more of a conceptual heterogeneity that is more difficult to quantify. Soft power lacks the property of being ‘read’ through a singular ‘reference gauge’ that allows for a fairly consistent interpretation when applied to various contexts of relations between national units.

This article is not about discussing the definition of what is soft power, but we should be careful with its applicability to practical cases, as it is relatively new. The most significant limit is to think of Soft power in a far too simple way, and we see many experts have predominantly compared US and EU Soft power strategies, discarding the many peculiarities that make a deeper-level comparison more difficult to sustain. However, it seems quite difficult to compare at a lower case level with the USA being a federal state structure with a ‘centralist’ White House balancing its powers against a House of Representatives, and the EU a Confederation with a panoply of Ministries of Foreign Affairs, high level of policy compartmentalization, plus the EU institutions who compete for power.

In the case of Russia in the EaP, the Soft power strategy is have to emerge from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. This paper will not discuss the theoretical structure of Russian soft power but will notwithstanding focus on key components of Russia’s influence in EaP countries.

First of all, we should remind the Russian influence is relying on two majors parameters: Russian language and a unitary religion. These two are essential because learning Russian language is increasing your interest for Russia. The ability to read newspapers, communicate, go on vacations, are considerable aspects of Russia’s influence. A unitary religion is also the concrete between EaP countries and Moscow. From the six EaP countries, only two (Azerbaijan and Armenia) are not Orthodox Christians. Other aspects are relevant such as Soviet history, but language and religion are clearly standing up.

Russia is attractive for security reasons in *de facto*/PR states, but also in the whole EaP. We should not underestimate the emotional attachment to the Cyrillic alphabet, Pan-Slavism in Ukraine and Belarus, strong anti-Islam feelings not only in EaP but all Central and Eastern Europe (underlined by public statements of the Polish government and the results of the German elections in the Eastern part of the country). The similarities with Russia are striking and should not be discarded. We should also make the distinction between official statements from the EaP Governments, and the interpretations and opinions of citizens in view of support to government policies and decision-making.

Second, the lack of European perspective and cultural disconnection. The EU's 'domestic' attractiveness and its value system has been continuously losing support (even though it is regarded upon by foreign actors as an influential and attractive 'Soft power' and deliberative, democratic policy model). Most of the EaP countries have realized they won't be able to apply for membership. EU membership requires high-level standard difficult to fulfil. Most part of Western European countries like France and even Germany would have difficulties to apply if they would have to do so nowadays. Moreover, EU membership has to be approved by all member states, and some are opposed having EaP countries in the EU. As long as the UK stays as a member state, and some countries like Austria, the Nederland, and France are facing populism, it seems complicated to enlarge the EU. Another significant parameter is the Eurozone crisis, and the image of a prosperous EU is far behind.

Another aspect is the cultural disconnection with difficulties for countries to openly accept EU's policy toward minorities. LGBT rights are still missing in Georgia and Moldova, and openly rejected by the population. Some EU member states are more conservative like Poland, but not as much as EaP countries and it constitutes a major obstacle to membership.

The lack of EU prospect in a close future is of course decreasing EU's soft power, and by contrast increasing bilateral relations between EaP countries and Russia.

Thirdly, the Soviet nostalgia is probably the strongest argument when it comes to Russia's soft power. The Soviet Union is positively perceived in some countries. The USSR triumphed over Nazi Germany and the victory is a factor of pride in countries like Moldova. Also, when the USSR have been an obstacle for the development of countries such as Czechoslovakia and Poland, it had been a success to modernise others like Moldova. If we put aside US/EU Soviet stereotypes, Moldova was a territory with villages but no major cities before the Second World War. The Soviet Union provided access to education and university, free health system, equality between men and women, no-unemployment, space conquest, etc. The USSR has been an obvious disaster when it comes to Politics and Freedom, but the economic system was somehow acceptable. The "Soviet nostalgia" isn't working in all post-Soviet space, but finds its roots in poor countries like Moldova with a GDP of no more than 1,700EUR/habitant and outside of large cities

in Ukraine. In a 2013 Gallup.Inc pool done in the former Soviet Union (excluding Baltic States and Uzbekistan) more than 50% of respondents said that more harm than good came as a result of the break-up of the Soviet Union. The President of Russia also openly stated that the end of the USSR was a “major geopolitical disaster of the 20th Century.”

In that context, it seems difficult for the EU and the US to appear as strong economic powers when Greece, Italy, Spain, and others are facing difficulties and bad repartition of wealth as underlined by the French economist Thomas Piketty and debate on Basic Income.

Russian medias are openly using these three aspects to weaken the EU and strength Moscow’s soft power in EaP countries. The current project of Eurasian Economic Union is also attractive and presented as an alternative to the EU, and somehow working because Belarus and Armenia decided to be part of it after almost a decade of EU fundings.

China is also important and should not be forgotten. Russia is not the strongest economic power in EaP countries, but definitely the most influential when it comes to Security issues. However, EU’s soft power is challenged by China’s economic power too. The decrease of EU attractiveness is partly connected to better opportunity provided by China in the context of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative.

Is Russian military and cultural influence in EaP countries so smart?

One fundamental question remains, is Russia having a “smart power” policy or a distinct “hard power” and “soft power” policy? Looking at the structure of Russian soft power, it seems the influence is relying on Soviet nostalgia, language, religion. In that context, we cannot really speak of a “soft power” policy because most of them are already working whether the Kremlin want it or not. We don’t see any attempts to convert the inhabitants, neither to make them learn Russian language in EaP countries. However, we can see some communication/propaganda strategies to use the similarities between Russia and EaP countries to attract them. Such strategies can be to push forward the “Orthodox” or “Slavic” identity. Russia is also using Russian language to communicate via its national news agencies, but nobody forces the inhabitants to watch them. In that context, we can speak of an “unconscious soft power” coming from Russia. The weaknesses of the EU and rising economic power of China are also important factors to explain the return of Russia’s influence in its neighbourhood.

When we look at hard power, we have to clearly be careful with statistics and see the quality over quantity. Russia isn’t as strong as some EU and US experts like to present it. In practice, the status quo reached in *de facto*/PR recognized states look like an equilibrium but not an offensive approach. Moreover, such territories can be perceived as buffer zones more than outposts. Transnistria and Abkhazia are more of no-man’s land not part of Russia neither EaP countries to make sure Moscow will be protected and not directly in touch with future EU and NATO member states. The strategy is however relevant because EaP countries can’t apply for EU membership because they don’t have the full control over their territories. Despite that, it is up to the European Union to accept application coming from countries not having full control over their territories like the Eurasian Economic Union did with Armenia. EaP countries could also decide to give up on their separatist territories to develop their own future perspectives too.

If we have a look at Russia’s military involvement, it seems that the coercive approach will be more economic with embargoes on gaz in Ukraine and wine in Moldova and Georgia. So far, Russia is using gaz to put pressure on Ukraine, but Kiev’s debt regarding Gazprom will be somehow sufficient to cut off gaz supplies. On October 2, 2007, Ukrainian debt was of more than 1.1 billion EUR and more than 1.3 billion EUR in 2015. Russian embargos on wine are more problematic and relying on weak arguments, but quite usual when we look at disputes between other countries like France and the USA with threat to put an embargo on French cheese when the French President Chirac refused to make war in Irak.

Can we really talk about “Russian smart power”? The question remains and we can’t see a clear strategy when it comes to soft power, and a hard power mostly focused on fear from EaP countries and peacekeepers in *de facto*/PR states.

Conclusion

It seems that both the EU and Russia are not really clear when it comes to the future of EaP countries. In Western Europe, the Eastern Partnership is supposed to strengthen “democracy and human rights,” when in Eastern Europe it has more of a geopolitical ambition to challenge and even curtail EU influence against Russia. Also, will the EU be ready to accept and pursue the integration of countries like Moldova and Ukraine if they can apply and pursue a process of complying to all Copenhagen criteria one day? And what will be the outcome of rejecting such application for a long time like the EU did in the case of Turkey?

What are Russia’s ambitions in the EaP? To integrate them into the Russian Federation, into the Eurasian Economic Union, or something else? The question remains mind boggling and while the Kremlin is not clear on the matter, it continues to follow a path leading more likely to a draw or stalemate, rather than an obvious defeat or victory.

At least, it seems that the European Union is seeking to prevent escalations and regional instability / insecurity via the OSCE and EUBAM mission. Yet the European Union should develop, refine, and proof-test a plan in case the Russian troops decide to suddenly withdraw from Transnistria or Abkhazia. Russia should also better try to find another partner to ensure peacekeeping operations and show something else than a military presence in EaP countries. The rise of China is probably a growing factor of change in Eastern Europe and the EU and Russia don’t know how to cope with that on all fronts. At least they desire something else than a stalemate between Brussels and Moscow. Who of them is really aspiring to offer new opportunities in EaP countries including *de facto*/PR states?

Key Recommendations

EU member states should rethink the way they deal with Russia in *de facto*/PR states and consider establishing a valuable emergency procedure if Russian troops have to withdraw on day. It seems important to understand that Transnistria without Russia will lead to another conflict and small arms trafficking in Ukraine and the Middle-East. The EU should take into consideration the fact Abkhazia and South Ossetia might face ethnic violence without the Russian peacekeepers to protect the inhabitants. Russia's soft power is relying on the weaknesses of the European Union, and the EU might be more realistic and pay attention to two or three EaP states only and focus on anti-corruption policies as it seems to be the main priority.

The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs should develop an expertise in the field of *de facto*/PR states and may become the leading country when it comes to EU/NATO excellence in frozen conflicts. Research centres like the IIR Prague could be part of the process as an expertise in frozen conflicts would significantly increase Czechia's soft power in the EU and abroad.

Like France and Great Britain during the Cold War, Czechia could push forward the dialogue with Russia and avoid the Manichean vision and the "us against them."

NATO member states should have a more accurate approach when it comes to Abkhazia and South Ossetia and re-evaluate the risks and consequences of another conflict in the Black Sea region. It would be relevant to have an emergency procedure to make sure the inhabitants in *de facto*/PR states will be protected if the Russian are leaving the area.

The Russian Federation isn't such a strong military power and the quantity is over quality with most equipments "Made in USSR." Moscow is trying to reach an equilibrium but not to invade EaP countries or would have done so already, and *de facto*/PR states can even be considered like a "buffer zone" between Russia and the European Union.

The Czech Ministry of Defence might develop an emergency procedure with other EU member states, OSCE, NATO, or simply with EaP countries, and make sure nothing will happen in case Russian peacekeepers/troops suddenly decide to withdraw from *de facto*/PR states.

Czech Intelligence Agency should also collect more datas regarding the weapons in Transnistria and South Ossetia if they haven't done so.

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs have to understand the deep division between Old and New EU member states. Old members consider the EaP to be the best way to ensure Rule of Law and fight

against corruption, and New member states think more about the EaP as a geopolitical tool to increase EU's sphere of influence.

Instead of focusing on who will have the strongest smart power in the EaP, the EU and Russia should share their perspectives and accept “in between” mentality of countries like Ukraine.

The Russian Ministry of Defence might be interested to involve EU/non-NATO peacekeepers (Austria, Sweden, Finland) in *de facto* states to give a different view regarding frozen conflicts.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China have an opportunity to ensure peace and stability in the EaP. China's business philosophy is a real asset in countries and *de facto*/PR states, and provides hope to the inhabitants. However, China should consider possible peacekeeping operations in Eastern Europe to ensure safety and become a mediator like in Djibouti.