

17

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# Giving “Asymmetric Response” to the EU: Russian Soft Power Experiment in Transnistria

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# GIVING “ASYMMETRIC RESPONSE” TO THE EU: RUSSIAN SOFT POWER EXPERIMENT IN TRANSNISTRIA<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This working paper tackles the issue of how Russia is trying to use soft power practices in its foreign policy toward Moldova / Transnistria. Despite a wide range of political and financial resources invested over the last years, Moscow’s approach still has many deficiencies, which also reveals a general problem of how Russian national interests in the neighbouring countries are formulated and defended. At the moment Russian soft power in Transnistria is shaped only by the state with much propagandistic content, is hardly connected to the functioning of Russian society or economy and does not contribute much to solving Transnistrian developmental problems. Besides, the Russian soft power experiment in Transnistria is being carried out in the context of geopolitical competition with the EU around Moldova’s future and is based on the logics of a zero sum game, having a purpose to support Russian exclusive influence on the left bank of Dniester and in Moldova in general. Using Joseph Nye’s terminology, it can be concluded that it is more about using classical economic than soft power.

## INTRODUCTION

While reflecting on the country’s foreign policy goals, Russian officials are more and more using the notion of soft power and stressing the need for Russia to accommodate soft power practices into its foreign policy-making. Its own neighbourhood is the main area where Moscow tries to adopt this new approach. The current paper examines the case of Russian policy in the Republic of Moldova, which became an important country for both the European Union and Russia on the eve of the Vilnius summit of the Eastern Partnership in November 2013. Here we see a growing activity of Russia especially in Transnistria, which is claimed by Russian officials to be fulfilled in accordance with best world practices of working through non-governmental organizations and producing soft power<sup>2</sup>. Such initiatives need a closer academic investigation in order to understand whether they can be seen as something new or simply as an incarnation of an old approach to diplomacy.

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1 The author would like to express his gratitude to Erasmus Mundus Action 2 – European Community Mobility Programme for supporting this research.

2 АНО Евразийская интеграция (2013а), ‘Александр Аргунов провёл итоговую пресс-конференцию’, available from <http://goo.gl/VBVlBL>.

The tool-kit of the Russian way of achieving its foreign policy goals in Moldova itself has remained largely the same for at least 10 years. It includes harsh rhetoric, trade embargos, moderate political and financial support of Transnistrian separatism and, at the same time, persuasion of the Moldovan public that Russia and Moldova are intertwined through a centuries-long history, a common heritage of World War II and that due to European integration Moldova would lose its sovereignty and eventually also its identity because of alleged Romanian assertiveness in absorbing the neighbour and the anti-democratic nature of Brussels' decision-making.

But in the breakaway region of Transnistria Moscow has drastically intensified its activities, which can be identified as elements for producing soft power. Since 2007–2008 Russia has begun to implement a so called “humanitarian project” on the left bank of Dniester establishing itself as a key provider of social stability. For example, in the framework of this initiative every Transnistrian pensioner has got an additional 15 dollars to his/her basic monthly retirement benefit. In the middle of 2012 Moscow decided to widen this support. Firstly, a non-commercial organization “Eurasian integration” was created with the budget of about 100 million dollars in order to finance the construction of 12 social objects in various cities of Transnistria (kindergartens, hospitals, school and university buildings) in 2013–2014. Secondly, Russia has drastically intensified the instruments of bilateral diplomacy in relations with Transnistria. Not to mention regular visits by Dmitry Rogozin, deputy head of the Russian government and Special Representative of the Russian President for Transnistria, producing all the time tough statements about geopolitical issues around Moldova, which by themselves become key political events in the region. Besides, patriarch Kirill for the first time in the history of the post-soviet Russian Orthodox Church visited Tiraspol and made a long speech in front of the Transnistrians in September 2013. And thirdly, due to the presence of various expert and non-governmental organizations affiliated with the Kremlin, Moscow has increased its informational and propagandistic influence. Particularly important is that this presence is becoming permanent while before it had irregular and unsystematic character.

In this paper it is argued that driven by the logic of the zero-sum game, the Russian soft power project in Transnistria is in fact aimed at buying Transnistrian loyalty in the face of severe socio-economic and political circumstances which threaten the breakaway region in the context of EU-Moldovan rapprochement. In the terminology of Joseph Nye we can identify this approach more in terms of payment than soft power, so the ally is not attracted, but his loyalty is paid through a number of initiatives realized by the external power on the ground. The fact that the Russian soft power move in general is driven exclusively by geopolitical

arguments and being carried out exclusively by state officials is considered by Joseph Nye as a key shortcoming of the Russian foreign policy, which will hardly make it sustainable and successful in the mid- and long-term perspective<sup>3</sup>. The Transnistrian experience is not expected to be an exception.

Besides, this soft power experiment does not seem to be based on a clear understanding why Russia should invest these resources in a time when it by itself is coming through a tough budgetary and economic crisis. Even if we try to rationalize the Russian “obsession” with Transnistria, it is hard to find a logical explanation to this in the light of all the mistrust toward the prospects of Moldovan and even Ukrainian participation in the Eurasian Union, which is widespread in the Russian public and expert discourse<sup>4</sup>.

## METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

To achieve a better understanding of the Russian approach to the creation of soft power we need firstly to refer to a classical concept of it proposed by Joseph Nye. Nye differentiated power into three main types – military, economic and soft, and described how one state can attract or coerce another using each type of power.

	Behaviours	Primary Currencies	Government policies
Military power	Coercion Deterrence Protection	Threats Force	Coercive diplomacy War Alliance
Economic power	Inducement Coercion	Payments Sanctions	Aid Bribes Sanctions
Soft power	Attraction Agenda setting	Values Culture Policies Institutions	Public diplomacy Bilateral and multilateral diplomacy

Source: Nye, J. (2004), *Soft power. The means to success in world politics*, PublicAffairs, p. 31.

Consequently, to examine the nature of policy executed by Russia in Transnistria and, more generally, in Moldova, an analysis is needed of whether Russian diplomacy is able to:

3 Nye, J. (2013), ‘What China and Russia don’t get about soft power’, *Foreign Policy*, 29 April 2013, available from <http://goo.gl/7z9xm>.

4 Cf. ИА Регнум (2013а), ‘Эксперт: “Украина нам не нужна, пусть идёт, куда хочет”’, available from <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1663600.html>

- Formulate a political approach based on specific values and norms, which would attract local audiences and not, for example, manipulate, indoctrinate, coerce or explicitly buy them;
- Frame itself for setting a future-oriented agenda, for example through appealing to the need for reforms;
- Engage other important international actors with their own agendas, for example the UN, Council of Europe, the European Union etc.;
- Provide itself with enough institutional resources and be open toward the participation of independent actors from non-governmental sector;
- Be grounded on a legitimate basis, or in other words be legitimized properly in Russia itself.

Particularly relevant for us is also Nye's idea that the importance of military power is in decline in the modern information age. Projecting this argument onto the realities in Moldova, we can clearly see that the military presence in Transnistria does not give Russia enough instruments to control the local situation. Moldova is trying to integrate with the EU without taking much care of the country's disintegration and Russian troops on the left bank of Dniester. The EU is drastically increasing its soft power in Moldova and is ready to use economic power against Transnistria, and thus Russia should react somehow if it wants to keep the status quo.

## **SOFT POWER IN THE SERVICE OF GEOPOLITICS**

To begin with, we should argue that Russian policy is still centred on geopolitical arguments, so that we could find out some kind of a path dependence going through Russian foreign policy after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Before the "colour revolutions" Russian political elites had been satisfied with the status quo in the post-soviet space and there was an illusion that Moscow had a dominant position in the region<sup>5</sup> while many post-soviet countries in fact pursued the way of "multi-vectoral policy" (they were trying to collide interests of great powers in order to gain a maximum of benefits from all of them). Colour

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5 For example, Russia of the 90s hoped to have enough resources to create an economic and political union within the Commonwealth of Independent States, which "would be capable to pretend to get a dignified place in the world politics" (quoted from МИД России (1995), 'Strategic course of Russia with the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States', available from <http://goo.gl/LBJa4c>). Today Russian officials and experts close to the Kremlin avoid to formulate any political goals for the Russian-led Eurasian integration and speak predominantly about economic gains of each participant (cf. Бордачев, Т., Островская, Е., and Скриба А. (2013), 'Выбор и вызов евразийской интеграции', *Россия в Глобальной Политике*, November 2013, available from <http://goo.gl/yvN2nO>).

revolutions shocked Russian decision-makers, so that they began to interpret first of all the EU as a geopolitical actor trying to deprive Moscow of its allegedly exclusive influence<sup>6</sup>. Since then all the moves of Brussels to be engaged more into the post-soviet affairs were met from Moscow with much fear and mistrust.

The EU has already made a series of attempts to break the status quo around the Republic of Moldova. From 2003 to 2011 the European Union proposed several times to Russia to turn the Transnistrian conflict settlement into a multilateral issue what in practice would lead to the withdrawal of 14<sup>th</sup> Army remnants from Transnistria (as agreed in the OSCE Istanbul Declaration in 1999) and a total revision of the peacekeeping format<sup>7</sup>. In 2005 Brussels established a Border Assistance Mission for improving the management of Moldovan borders. In March 2006 under the pressure of the EU a customs regime was also changed for Tiraspol by Ukraine, so that all Transnistrian export goods had to be registered at the Moldovan customs service. Moscow reacted then with a harsh rhetoric about an “economic blockade” of the breakaway region<sup>8</sup> and started to re-evaluate its policy priorities toward Transnistria. The signing of the Zhukov-Smirnov protocol<sup>9</sup> in May 2006 was one of the first symbols of a new “soveranization” strategy of Moscow in Transnistria when Russia started to openly consider the breakaway region more and more as an equal partner (along with Moldova). Russia expressed some support for Transnistrian referenda on prospects of independence from Moldova and association with Russia<sup>10</sup> and drastically widened its financial support to the Transnistrian de facto statehood.

First, Russia made direct payments to Tiraspol for adding 15 dollars to each Transnistrian monthly pension, providing better feeding at kindergartens and schools, increasing the way of living for disabled persons etc. In 2007–2010 it was 55.5 million dollars; in 2011 28 million dollars of humanitarian and also macroeconomic assistance were transferred to Tiraspol<sup>11</sup>. Besides, Moscow invested 10.7 million dollars into the system of credits for Transnistrian small-scale businesses and agricultural sector. Second, since 2008 Transnistria fully stopped

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6 Рябов, А. (2005), ‘Москва принимает вызов «цветных» революций’, *Pro et Contra*, July-August 2005, pp. 18–27.

7 Löwenhardt, J. (2004), ‘The OSCE, Moldova and Russian Diplomacy in 2003’, *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, no. 4, pp. 103–112.

8 РИА Новости (2006), ‘Новый таможенный режим для Приднестровья назван политической акцией’, available from <http://goo.gl/bSf1le>.

9 Alexander Zhukov was at that time a deputy head of the Russian government and Igor Smirnov was the “president” of Transnistria.

10 МИД России (2006), ‘Комментарий Департамента информации и печати МИД России в связи с вопросом СМИ о референдуме в Приднестровье’, available from <http://goo.gl/Sx9uF2>.

11 Правительство Российской Федерации (2013), ‘Молдова. Обзор торговых отношений с РФ’, available from <http://goo.gl/sza3ry>.

payments for Russian gas, a move that is tolerated by Russian authorities. However, these payments were continued by the population and companies and reallocated for financing the budget deficit, which is in 2013 officially estimated to be 40%<sup>12</sup>. Taking into account that more than 80% of the Transnistrian budget is spent for social programs or subsidizing socially important sectors (like communal service or public transport, which are fully state owned)<sup>13</sup>, Russia began to institutionalize its position as a key provider of social stability in the region.

In the 1990s and the first half of 2000s Russian support for Transnistria was first of all of military and political nature. There was not such a big difference in how Russia treated Moldova and Transnistria in the gas sphere while Tiraspol fulfilled its commercial commitments, even if with delays. Russian military and political support had been crucial for saving the Transnistrian statehood, particularly in 1992. Nevertheless, in economic terms the Transnistrian region was quite self-sustaining at that time.

But in general even today this financial assistance should not be overestimated. Russia has tried to keep Transnistria alive in terms of social stability, but not more. There have not been any substantial direct and regular subsidies to the Transnistrian budget or economy, as well as the engagement of the region into the Russian educational, social, economic and administrative space. It should be also noted that Russian soft power investments are being done bypassing the Transnistrian government: the humanitarian project is fulfilled through a special bank account of the Transnistrian parliament, while the social construction projects are carried out by a special Russia-controlled organization "Eurasian integration".

Besides, particularly during the crisis, many factories in Transnistria drastically decreased their industrial production and therefore gas consumption, so that the financial incomes and abilities of Transnistrian authorities turned out to be restricted. One of the first measures implemented by the new leader of Transnistria Evgeny Shevchouk in 2012 was to establish a regime of fiscal austerity. Consequently, the amount of financial resources at the disposal of the Transnistrian government is still very moderate and is based predominantly on income from the local economy. Moscow contributes rather to preserving and improving some social standards in Transnistria, which at the end turn out to be higher than in Moldova itself (for

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12 ИА Новый регион (2013а), 'Дефицит бюджета в Приднестровье в ближайшие годы снизить практически не удастся', 29 August 2013, available from <http://goo.gl/cIIMjw>.

13 ИА Новый регион (2013b), 'Минфин Приднестровья доложил, как при отсутствии закона о бюджете-2013 расходуются государственные деньги', available from <http://goo.gl/TCL8oD>.

example, the average pension in Moldova is about 60 Euro<sup>14</sup>, while on the left bank it amounts to more than 100 Euro<sup>15</sup>).

Politically the sovranization strategy was denounced immediately after the Russian-Georgian war, when the Kremlin tried to demonstrate its readiness to positively contribute to European security. Despite some initial attempts, the Transnistrian case was explicitly excluded from the discussions about recognizing *de facto* states at the State Duma sessions and only Abkhazia and South Ossetia remained on the agenda.

Nevertheless, Moscow's behaviour in the context of negotiations about signing a political association agreement between Moldova and the EU in 2012 has again shown that Russian policy is reactive in its substance and begins to activate itself only after a strong push from the outside. When it became clear that the association agreement is a possible option both for Moldova and Ukraine despite internal problems in these countries, it seems that Russia began to perceive the first steps of economic and political integration of both Chisinau and Kiev as an existential threat to its positions in the post-soviet area. Russia was not able to keep its illusions about exclusive dominance, because if implemented these agreements would break the status of these countries as "in-between" and prevent them legally and politically from participating in the Customs Union.

Consequently, the situation is now much more serious than in 2006. It is not simply about the Moldovan geopolitical / geoeconomic orientation, but also about the economic existence of the *de facto* independent Transnistria. Since 2006 the region has been a part of the Moldovan customs space and if it wants to remain there and further export its products to the EU market with trade preferences like Moldova's, it should participate in the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. Otherwise Transnistrian exporters will suffer after 2015 from high trade tariffs (10–15%) and will not be able to sell to the EU because of non-implementation of useful standards and norms<sup>16</sup>. Up to 20 % of Transnistrian export can be directly affected by these circumstances<sup>17</sup>.

The consensus among Moscow's governing elites seems to be already found: to guarantee Transnistrian geopolitical loyalty through a bearable pool of additional

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14 Kommersant.md (2013), 'Минимальная пенсия в Молдове с 1 апреля составит 750 леев', available from <http://goo.gl/NBWSvC>.

15 Новости Приднестровья (2013), 'В 2014 году увеличение пенсий пройдёт поэтапно', available from <http://goo.gl/NWLMJq>.

16 Berlin Economics GmbH (2013), 'The Impact of the EU-Moldova DCFTA on the Transnistrian Economy: Quantitative Assessment under Three Scenarios', available from <http://goo.gl/3aOxYo>.

17 Верховный совет ПМР, (2013), 'Прогноз социально-экономического развития Приднестровской Молдавской Республики на 2014–2016 годы', available from <http://goo.gl/RxQVMX>.

financial and organizational resources, which are needed because of increasing economic problems in Tiraspol, and to obstruct by all means the European integration of Moldova. The problem is that such a consensus is based on a negative basis (to contain the Other) and lacks a positive strategy (why should it be done?). There is a discussion in Russian political circles: The first group, a nationalistic one, claims that Transnistria is a pro-Russian territory with a high number of compatriots, which should be at least fully integrated into Russian economic, social and cultural space. This logic neglects Russian interests toward Moldova by saying that there are no pro-Russian political forces in Chisinau and that both banks of Dniester do not have a common future<sup>18</sup>. Obstructing the Europeanization of Moldova is here simply a means of defending Transnistria.

This opinion is quite widespread today in the political analysis made in Moscow on Moldova / Transnistria, but the second, a more traditional discourse, is still also very powerful among Russian political elites. It is supposed that Transnistria is a key instrument for controlling the geopolitical orientation of Moldova and eventually an important pro-Russian element of a reconstructed Moldovan statehood. This instrumental approach has always been openly criticized in Transnistria, which fears to be only an object of a game and be merged with Moldova. Moscow tried to sponsor such a solution in 1997, 2000–2002 and 2008–2009 when the Russian-Moldovan relations seemed to be favourable to Moscow. Besides, Dmitry Rogozin has several times mentioned in his speeches to the Moldovan public that the Customs Union would be a good solution for Moldova<sup>19</sup>, which means that the creation of the Eurasian Union, defined by Vladimir Putin as his key foreign policy priority<sup>20</sup>, remains a long-term goal for Moscow's approach also to Chisinau, and Transnistria is part of this game.

Such an instrumental approach is also supported by a wave of technocratic, pragmatic logic of Russian decision-makers<sup>21</sup>. It is interesting that one of the most popular Russian tabloids "Moskovsky Komsomolets" published a series of critical articles about Dmitry Rogozin and the Kremlin's foreign policy. In one of them he is portrayed as a paper tiger whose real purpose is to liquidate Transnistria because

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18 Cf. Ильина, Н. (2013), 'Фантик без конфеты', *Эксперт*, no. 50.

19 Соловьев, В. (2013), 'День победы евразийской интеграции', *Коммерсант-Молдова*, 9 May 2013.

20 Adomeit, H. (2012), 'Putin's 'Eurasian Union': Russia's Integration Project and Policies on Post-Soviet Space', *CIES Neighborhood Policy Paper*, no. 4, available from <http://goo.gl/Hi0Tvi>.

21 Makarychev, A. (2011), 'Hard Questions about Soft Power: A Normative Outlook at Russia's Foreign Policy', *DGAPanalyse kompakt*, no. 7, p. 3.

many in the Kremlin do not understand the necessity to spend money for its *de facto* statehood<sup>22</sup>.

These contradictions between “nationalists” and “geopolitical technocrats” create a substantial problem for formulating and achieving Russian foreign policy goals in Moldova. While the message from Putin is first and foremost about acquiring control over the whole of Moldova, many experts and officials involved in the foreign policy process isolate themselves from the Moldovan side, stating that Moldova is becoming a part of Romania, permanently deceiving Russia etc<sup>23</sup>. They prefer to work only with Transnistria also because it is much harder to work in a more competitive and differentiated landscape of Moldovan internal politics. As a result, Moscow focuses most of all on loyal constituencies like Transnistria and Gagauzia ignoring Moldova as a whole<sup>24</sup>.

## NEW WINE INTO OLD BOTTLES

In May 2013, during his visit to Tiraspol for celebrating the victory in World War II, Dmitry Rogozin, the Special Representative of the Russian President for Transnistria, announced that the “humanitarian project” of Russia in Transnistria would include also the construction of socially significant objects like kindergartens, hospitals, school and university buildings with a common budget of about 100 million US dollars for the period of 2013–2014<sup>25</sup>. A special non-governmental organization “Eurasian Integration”, which was created by the Russian parliamentarian Alexey Zhuravlev, a close party associate of Dmitry Rogozin is used for executing this project under the slogan “First aid from Russia”. This organization gets funding directly from the Russian budget and invests it into the Transnistrian projects.

Is this Russian initiative based on a new approach, which can be characterized in terms of soft power? First, the logic of a zero sum game is fully underpinning this move. For example, during the presentation of a new element of the Russian humanitarian project in Transnistria Dmitry Rogozin said that “The Council of Europe is constructing here in Moldova a new prison. To my mind, it is important that on the left bank kindergartens are built. It seems to be much more important

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22 Перевозкина, М. (2013), ‘Станет ли Дмитрий Rogozin ликвидатором Приднестровья?’, *Московский комсомолец*, 4 September 2013, available from <http://goo.gl/rWF3iu>.

23 Cf. РИА Новости (2010), ‘Прозападные силы в Молдове пытаются вывести ее из СНГ – российский парламентарий’, available from <http://goo.gl/59sPCn>.

24 Cwiek-Karpowicz, J. (2013), ‘Limits to Russian Soft Power in the Post-Soviet Area’, in Meister, S. (ed), *Economization versus Power Ambitions. Rethinking Russia's Policy towards Post-Soviet states*, Nomos, p. 57.

25 АНО Евразийская интеграция (2013b), ‘Скорая помощь из России заступила на дежурство’, 7 May 2013, available from <http://goo.gl/eD8pDu>.

than to have a modern prison"<sup>26</sup>. Such statements reveal all the emotional and EU-centred background of Moldova-related decisions made by Russia in the last months. Furthermore, Russian authorities intend to use the social infrastructure, which is being constructed in Transnistria for attracting the population of Moldova. It was mentioned several times that hospitals could be of use also for Moldovans. Dmitry Rogozin even said that after "Eurasian forces" come to power in Chisinau, the organization "Eurasian Integration" is expected to continue its activities also on the right bank of Dniester<sup>27</sup>. Herewith he has confirmed that Moscow still has a wish to achieve geopolitical victory in the whole Moldova (apparently due to the Moldovan Communist Party, which seems to be able to win the parliamentary elections in autumn 2014) and does not see Transnistria as the first priority in this context.

This support is first aimed at keeping the geopolitical loyalty of Transnistrian elites and society, which are aware of the critical socio-economic situation in the region now and an eventual economic blockade after the creation of DCFTA between Moldova and the EU. In this sense, the logic standing behind Russian activities reminds more of "payment" than classical soft power. It is enough just to have a look at the Transnistrian Internet-forums, which were very critical of Russia earlier; the bloggers noted that Russian support had been hardly visible in the region and that Russia even abandoned it<sup>28</sup>. Besides, the Transnistrian authorities should be somehow praised for their rejection to participate in various European initiatives like "Euroregion Dniester" or DCFTA which, taken pragmatically, could have some advantages for Tiraspol.

Meanwhile, Russia is continuing its tactics of moderate, "smart" support of Transnistria. Transnistrian authorities and experts propose the creation of an airport in Tiraspol, a special trade agency with a substantial budget, which would support the reorientation of the Transnistrian export to Russia, a full implementation of Russian laws in Transnistria, a widening of support for building social infrastructure and starting technical projects in some Transnistrian industries etc., but their Russian counterparts abstain from accepting these initiatives. Transnistrian authorities also try to securitize the European integration of Moldova as much as possible, saying that substantial Russian support is needed, but Russian representatives at various roundtables insist that the Vilnius summit and its consequences would not become

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26 Президент ПМР (2013a), 'Евгений Шевчук и Дмитрий Рогозин ответили на вопросы журналистов', available from <http://goo.gl/fqq17h>.

27 Пахольницкий, Н. (2013), 'Дмитрий Рогозин заглянул в Приднестровье издалека', *Коммерсант-Молдова*, 25 November 2013.

28 РИА Днестр (2012), 'Приднестровье. Неудачный форпост', available from <http://goo.gl/HkVsGQ>.

an existential threat for Transnistria due to the Russian assistance already given to Tiraspol by Moscow<sup>29</sup>.

Of course, a moderate approach can be explained by the budgetary problems of Russia itself, which was noted several times by Russian officials themselves. For example, during a press-briefing Alexander Argunov, the head of the organization “Eurasian Integration”, openly said that due to heavy budgetary problems, Russian funding for Transnistria can hardly be increased, but it will be kept at the same level<sup>30</sup>. Nevertheless, geopolitical goals toward the whole Moldova still keep Moscow from recognizing or absorbing Transnistria in any form. Moscow gives an asymmetric response to Brussels: while Moscow does not have any resources to influence Moldovan foreign policy directly and to keep it from the European path, it could turn Transnistria into its geopolitical fortress and try to project influence also on the right bank, supporting there the “Eurasian forces” politically and in the future also financially.

In this context it is interesting to see how today’s foreign policy makers are criticized from inside the Russian foreign policy elite. For example, the former head of one of the departments of the Russian Presidential Office, and the director of the Information Agency REGNUM, Modest Kolerov, wrote in October 2013 an article about how official Russian representatives, whom he sees as “parquet babblers”, are creating the “humanitarian catastrophe” in Transnistria prior to the Moldova’s European integration, because they do not want to recognize Transnistria and to invest more resources into the Transnistrian economy and simply misuse the concept of Eurasian integration for rhetorical purposes. Kolerov said that even a part of the resources spent for Ukraine today are enough to make Transnistria into a “socialist paradise”<sup>31</sup>. Kolerov got a response from Vasily Kashirin who claimed to be a Russian policy-maker on the Transnistrian issue and represent the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies permanently present in Tiraspol. Kashirin argued that the Eurasian integration of Transnistria, which is happening due to substantial material and political support of the Russian Federation, is the first step on the way to fulfil the idea of the continental imperial project of the Russian state with the participation of Transnistria as its integral part<sup>32</sup>. Paradoxically, both Kolerov and Kashirin share one “nationalistic” vision, but they belong simply to different generations: Kashirin

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29 ИА Регнум (2013b), ‘Эксперт РИСИ: Блокада Приднестровья “будет начинаться постепенно, и у ПМР будет время для принятия решений”’, 29 October 2013, available from <http://goo.gl/6xjvco>.

30 Медиациентр Евразийское Приднестровье (2013), ‘Моя работа в Приднестровье – это “работа мечты”’, available from <http://goo.gl/fs14mE>.

31 Колеров, М. (2013), ‘Создатели гуманитарной катастрофы: евразийская риторика Москвы и Приднестровье’, available from <http://goo.gl/0HqBvE>.

32 Каширин, В. (2013), ‘Похвала приднестровскому евразийству, или Рефутация г-на Колерова’, available from <http://goo.gl/Pyllfg>.

is working for the Russian diplomacy now and should defend its line, while Kolerov was in office immediately after the colour revolutions and contributed much to initiating the Russian “soveranization” strategy toward Transnistria.

Kolerov is correct that rhetoric started to play a very important role in Russian activities in Transnistria. Russia substantially increased the number of propagandistic instruments in the region. In addition to several visits of Dmitry Rogozin, Transnistria was visited by the Patriarch Kirill who appealed to the “Transnistrian people” with a message that they should keep their faith and proud historical heritage of Suvorov, World War II etc. despite all socio-economic and political problems the region is facing<sup>33</sup>. The Russian expert organizations like the above-mentioned Russian Institute for Strategic Studies participate now on a permanent basis in various Transnistrian roundtables, TV programs and other arrangements where they propagate the irreversible course of Eurasian integration for Transnistria, its belonging to the “Russian world”, ruinous consequences of the European integration for Moldova and Transnistria and the fact that Moldova is becoming a part of Romania etc. The style of all these appearances is close to indoctrination and fully excludes any dialogue or debates<sup>34</sup>.

These statements are aimed at creating a feeling that Russia is delivering substantial support for Transnistria<sup>35</sup>. As a consequence, high expectations are appearing in Transnistria<sup>36</sup>, but for Russia it will be very hard to meet them and not to disappoint the Transnistrian public. Russian officials are constantly producing simulacrums (unsatisfactory imitations) like the new variant of a Transnistrian-Russian protocol this time signed by Rogozin and Transnistrian leader Shevchouk in October 2013<sup>37</sup>. In the framework of this protocol Russian officials try to convince Transnistrians that “work is being done”, for example in order to include Tiraspol into the system of Russian state tenders, to widen prospects for Russian-Transnistrian interregional cooperation, cooperation among universities etc. Even the Transnistrian experts loyal to Russia like Valeriy Litskai, the former Transnistrian “foreign minister”, criticize the document saying that it does not contain any

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33 Московский Патриархат (2013), ‘Святейший Патриарх Кирилл: Жителей Приднестровья крепко соединяет православная вера’, available from <http://goo.gl/yCSWF4>.

34 Cf. МИД ПМР (2013), ‘Программа ‘Публичная дипломатия’ 2.11.2013’, available from <http://goo.gl/oq1tj3>.

35 АНО Евразийская интеграция (2013с), ‘Дмитрий Рогозин: Деятельность «Евразийской интеграции» доказывает, что у Приднестровья есть будущее’, available from <http://goo.gl/ZXnlXm>.

36 Cf. ИА Регнум (2013с), ‘Приднестровье: “Надежду на будущее нам дает Россия”’, available from <http://goo.gl/mhs501>.

37 Президент ПМР (2013b), ‘Протокол по итогам рабочей встречи Заместителя Председателя Правительства Российской Федерации, специального представителя Президента Российской Федерации по Приднестровью Д.О. Рогозина и Президента Приднестровья Е.В. Шевчука’, available from <http://goo.gl/n4ISMa>.

concrete figures while Transnistria needs allegedly 2–3 billion US dollars for the reorientation of its export toward Russia<sup>38</sup>. Moreover, if we take specifically the idea of Transnistrian participation in Russian state tenders, it should be noted that they are aimed first of all at supporting Russian companies during the economic crisis and that Transnistrians are financially and organizationally hardly able to compete with Russian firms within these procedures.

Turning back to the Russian soft power experiment, could we identify it as a sustainable effort? Its key problem is that it favours the conservation of political, economic and social practices in Transnistria instead of their gradual modernization. It is often stressed by Russian officials that Russia accommodated best management practices for its social projects in Transnistria and that Transnistrian authorities do not get any funds directly, what allegedly provides a high degree of transparency and efficiency of these projects<sup>39</sup>. But Moscow failed to establish a positive agenda for development through such assistance. While investing into the post-soviet space including Moldova, the European Union on its part tries to foster reforms and makes targeted planning. Its assistance to Moldova is about 100 million euro annually<sup>40</sup>; the money is going into reforming the police, border management, gaining energy efficiency etc.

The Russian approach consists of subsidizing directly the social sphere in Transnistria, which is what the Europeans would avoid doing. Russian “additions” to Transnistrian pensions or Russian tolerance towards Transnistrian gas debts emerging because of reallocations to the Transnistrian budget are the best examples of such policy. The EU also does investments into social infrastructure, but this seems to be of secondary importance for its agenda. Consequently, Russian initiatives do not create much potential for changing the situation on the ground: the Transnistrian economy is becoming completely dysfunctional and unable to sustain the social spending of the budget; the political system is also far from corresponding to the principles of good governance. Russia also sends a clear message to Transnistria that it strongly supports current authorities and favours further marginalization of the Transnistrian opposition. Vasily Kashirin from the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies even openly blames the Transnistrian “Internet-opposition” for being “impotent” and “inadequate”<sup>41</sup>. As a result, short-

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38 ИА Новый регион (2013с), ‘Эксперты: Приднестровье идёт в одну сторону, а его экономика – в другую, и это большая проблема’, 12 November 2013, available from <http://goo.gl/eg6ndF>.

39 Журавлев, А. (2013), ‘Алексей Журавлёв: Объекты в Приднестровье будут сданы по графику’, available from <http://goo.gl/IUvY4o>.

40 European External Action Service (2013), ‘EU – Moldova relations: basic facts’, available from <http://goo.gl/lrml9l>.

41 РИА Днестр (2014), ‘Каширин: приднестровская оппозиция неадекватна и импотентна’, available from <http://goo.gl/ubMfDU>.

term social stability is provided, but economic prospects and the situation in the governance system in the breakaway region remain the same, if not worsening.

The second problem is that Russian activities are hardly connected with the discursive functioning of the Russian society or any needs of the Russian economy. The Russian companies (first of all Metalloinvest, InterRAO), which invested into Transnistrian factories like Moldavian Metallurgic Plant or Moldavian Power Station, do not obviously have much commercial interest toward these assets and share this burden supposedly due to a request from the Kremlin. Normal functioning of these factories is hard to achieve because of the world economic crisis, high costs of their modernization, growing gas prices etc. A very symbolic statement about the commercial perspectives of the Russia-owned assets was done by the director of Moldavian Metallurgic Plant A. Yudin in summer 2011 while in reference to a complex of political and administrative problems he said that in the coming perspective the management of the factory was not planning any initiatives aimed at the development of the company<sup>42</sup>.

Russian public opinion does not care much about the events in the neighbouring Moldova and Transnistria. Only Ukraine and Belarus do have extensive media presence in Russia. The Moldovan / Transnistrian issue is rather being artificially brought into the public discourse through some propagandistic films and articles of the Russian mass-media. The main ones were a film "Transnistria: Russian frontier" at the TV channel NTV<sup>43</sup> and a film "Moldavian Eurorepair" of the TV channel Russia24<sup>44</sup>. Much of Russian print media loyal to the Kremlin also discovered Transnistria and Moldova for themselves. For example, "Rossiskaya gazeta" took a big interview by Nina Shtanski, current Transnistrian "foreign minister", and in an introduction described Transnistria as a territory where Russians are living and which through economic blockade is threatened to become a province of Romanizing Moldova<sup>45</sup>. As sociological surveys show, the Russian audience agrees in general with the Kremlin's policy after getting such media content, but it fully disagrees with any substantial spending for geopolitics, even in Ukraine<sup>46</sup>. Russian political discourse is now concentrating more on specific Russian problems like corruption and acquires some isolationist features. Consequently, the Kremlin's *post factum* legitimization of its geopolitical undertakings abroad is not successful enough.

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42 ИА Новый регион (2011), 'Российские и приднестровские эксперты и промышленники обсуждают проблемы экономики Приднестровья', available from <http://goo.gl/IVB2OC>.

43 НТВ (2013), 'Приднестровье: Русский форпост', available from <http://goo.gl/cDXIMk>.

44 Россия24 (2013), 'Молдавский евроремонт. Специальный репортаж Д.Арапова', available from <http://goo.gl/88yLQJ>.

45 Федакина, А. (2013), 'На краю европропасти', *Российская газета*, 17 December 2013.

46 Никольский, А. (2013), 'Россияне не приветствуют майдан', *Ведомости*, 26 December 2013.

## FUTURE OPTIONS

Thus, it can be concluded that Russian soft initiatives in Transnistria can hardly be identified as practices producing soft power. They do not create long-standing sustainable effects, contain much propagandistic style and serve only short-term goals in the logic of a zero sum game.

But what if we evaluate the efficiency of the Russian approach in Nye's terminology as payment, how would the achievements of Russian policy and the resources invested be expected to correspond with each other? Even in this case Russian geopolitical calculations in Moldova / Transnistria seem to be very schematic. Trying to reconstruct these calculations, we could imagine the following scenario: Russian authorities are planning not simply to obstruct the European integration of Moldova, but also to contribute to the victory of allegedly "Eurasian forces" in Chisinau (so, Moldovan Communist Party with or without Voronin, probably in a coalition with Igor Dodon) in autumn 2014. Moscow does not trust Voronin (remembering very well his behaviour in 2003–2007), that's why it is preparing for him both sticks (first of all, trade restrictions for Moldova as a country outside of Eurasian Union, the expulsion of Moldovan migrants from Russia) and carrots (a new gas deal which could be very profitable for Moldova, which would be paying about 400 dollars per 1000 cubic meters of Russian gas). The goal is to get a reunited Moldova into the Eurasian Union as a member or as an associate member (depends on political circumstances). If this strategy fails, Russia could try to convince the EU of the necessity to recognize Transnistria as an independent state and make it into some kind of a pro-Russian protectorate or eventually a part of Russia, marking the geopolitical border with the EU along Dniester.

Thus, Russian foreign policy seems to be done in a STANDBY regime till all the positive factors appear for realizing these plans. But Russia does not take into consideration that it has fully alienated not only the European Union, but also the Moldovan political and intellectual elites and half of the Moldovan public, which will not agree with such geopolitical capitulation. Realities in Moldova have changed since 2003, and even then the Kozak Memorandum<sup>47</sup> failed or would have failed even if it would have been signed. Besides, in the framework of geopolitical competition with Russia and taking into account its security interests, the EU will hardly agree with the recognition of Transnistrian independence, particularly

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47 The Kozak Memorandum was a 2003 Russian proposal aimed at a final settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. The plan was a detailed proposal for a united asymmetric federal Moldavian state. According to the memorandum, Russian troops (no more than 2000 strong, without heavy armaments) would remain in Transnistria for the transitional period but not later than 2020. The proposal was ultimately rejected by Moldovan president Vladimir Voronin.

facing a problem of growing separatism in the EU itself. It should also be noted that Vladimir Voronin has already fully demonstrated his pragmatism and isolationist stance while he came to power in 2001 with pro-Russian slogans, rejected to follow them and the path of Kozak Memorandum as well and after that allied with pro-Romanian forces using a strong anti-Russian rhetoric. He will hardly be willing to make Moldova into a Russian protectorate and by all means will try to avoid Russian dominance.

Russian geopolitical calculations are probably not so serious and it is more about abandoning the illusion of a Russia-dominated post-soviet space. On one hand, Russian authorities cannot cope with this loss, but on the other hand they are not able to develop a sustainable strategy for realizing its geopolitical dreams. In the end, Russia is presenting itself more and more as an obstructing power without a clear vision of its own interests, which have to be formulated more realistically and without such a strong reference to the Russian post-imperial syndrome.

Meanwhile Russian soft power seems to be now more a formal rather than practical accommodation of Western experience into the Russian foreign policy. Russia explicitly uses more the logic of classical economic power introducing sanctions against Moldova and trying to buy the Transnistrian loyalty by “first aid” instruments.

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