Incomplete Hegemonies, Hybrid Neighbours:
Identity games and policy tools in Eastern Partnership countries

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Abstract

This paper applies the concepts of hegemony and hybridity as analytical tools to help understand the structural changes taking place within the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries and beyond. The author points to the split identities of many post-Soviet societies and the growing appeal of solutions aimed at balancing Russia's or the EU's dominance as important factors shaping EaP dynamics. Against this background, he explores how the post-Soviet borderlands can find their place in a still hypothetical pan-European space, and free themselves from the tensions of their competing hegemons. The EaP is divided into those countries that signed Association Agreements with the EU and those preferring to maintain their loyalty to Eurasian integration. Bringing the two groups closer together, however, is not beyond policy imagination.

The policy-oriented part of this analysis focuses on a set of ideas and schemes aimed at enhancing interaction and blurring divisions between these countries. The author proposes five scenarios that might shape the future of EaP countries' relations with the EU and with Russia: 1) the conflictual status quo in which both hegemonic powers will seek to weaken the position of the other; 2) trilateralism (EU, Russia plus an EaP country), which has been tried and failed, but still is considered as a possible option by some policy analysts; 3) the Kazakhstan-Armenia model of diplomatic advancement towards the EU, with some potential leverage on Russia; 4) deeper engagement by the EU with the Eurasian Economic Union, which has some competences for tariffs and technical standards; and 5) the decoupling of security policies from economic projects, which is so far the most difficult option to foresee and implement in practice.

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Introduction

The concept of hybridity is widely used to describe an important institutional feature of most of the post-Soviet regimes. Less studied are cultural elements of hybridity, mostly related to in-between identities of borderlands located at the intersection of different civilizational (societal, religious, ethnic and linguistic) spaces and flows. This paper first discusses how cultural hybridity impacts upon institutional politics in the countries of the EU-Russia common neighbourhood. It then looks at how the EU and Russia as two major powers in the post-Soviet region deal with the hybrid – and thus unstable and dislocated – identities of their neighbours.

The concept of hybridity not only to post-Soviet liminal countries, but also to EU's and Russia's policies. For example, Richard Youngs conveys the idea of a new EU "hybrid geopolitics … mixing offensive and defensive tactics, and of the Union using its distinctive tools aimed at deepening cooperation with Eastern Partnership (EaP) states, interdependence and political transformation, both more instrumentally and more variably to further immediate-term security interests. The category, i.e. of "hybrid geopolitics", is 'redux' liberal in the sense of the EU using core liberal-cooperative practices in ways that are more selective and calibrated than in previous European policies, and superimposed with a layer of geo-strategic diplomacy."[1] In the meantime, EU-Russian relations may also be dubbed hybrid, in the sense that they are grounded in two overlapping systems of interaction – an old one inherited from the times of the Cold War, with hard security concerns and spheres-of-influence type of thinking, and an allegedly emerging new approach that Andrey Kortunov relates to the still hypothetical reinvigoration of "common spaces" or "regimes of communication".[2]

Unlike some realist voices, this paper assumes that the comeback to the Cold-War-style spheres of influence is not a viable option for the EU-Russia common neighbourhood. As the recent dynamics in the Russia-loyal Kazakhstan, Armenia and – to some extent – Belarus shows, institutional partnership with Russia does not preclude them from looking for better and deeper relations with the EU. One observes a similar shift towards an enhanced relationship with Brussels in Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Moldova is a different example of searching for a

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new balance in the EU-Russia conundrum: under Igor Dodon's presidency, Chisinau overtly shows interest in freezing its previous commitments taken within its Association Agreement with the EU and build new bridges to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Of course, one should not project this demand for compromise and equilibrium to all post-Soviet areas, yet the examples given above attest to a need for more nuanced political arrangements to avoid further escalation of confrontation in the wider Europe.

The search for new solutions should take into account some characteristics shared by the EU and Russia, despite the dissimilarities in their foreign policies. Both Brussels and Moscow have developed and put into practice certain combinations of inclusive and exclusive policy tools, and their hegemonic roles are doomed to remain incomplete.[3] The idea of incompleteness – and, therefore, fluidity and volatility – of the post-Soviet transformation and the hegemonic roles of Russia and the EU in this process have been already discussed by analysts from different perspectives.[4] In the context of my analysis, incomplete hegemony might be understood as a two-pronged concept. On the one hand, it suggests that there are no 'natural' borders delimiting the area of their normative (in the case of the EU) or civilisational (in the case of Russia) extension. These borders are shifting depending on different circumstances, including those beyond the reach of either Russia or the EU (for example, China's policies are of the highest importance in this respect). On the other hand, both hegemonies are incomplete in the sense that neither the EU nor Russia can fully and comprehensively (i.e. institutionally, normatively, economically or security-wise) integrate their neighbours within their normative and civilisational projects. Thus, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia demand much more – including the membership perspective – than the EU can supply at this juncture. The same goes for Armenia, which expects Russia to stop arms sales to Azerbaijan, and for South Ossetia and Transnistria, which wish – to no avail so far – Russia to absorb them. Concomitantly, each of the two dominant actors faces the necessity to meet elevated expectations of some of their neighbours, on the one hand, and set certain limitations in associating with them, on the other.

This paper primarily focuses on the most recent experiences of those countries that are experimentally looking for carving out policy niches for their own subjectivities in a situation of EU-Russia institutional and political split. Some post-Soviet states (such as Armenia[5]) and non-recognised territories (such as Transnistria[6]) wish to assert themselves as "bridges between Eastern and Western Europe", yet these self-descriptions largely remain linguistic metaphors lacking practical content and substantiation. In manoeuvring between the two hegemonic projects, countries located in-between look for solutions and compromises that transcend the

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[3] Andrey Makarychev and Vlad Strukov, "(In)complete Europe vis-à-vis (in)complete Russia", PONARS-Eurasia website, 5 June 2017.

[4] See Andrew Wilson, "Partners for Life: Europe's Unanswered 'Eastern Question'", European Council on Foreign Relations, 27 October 2017.

[5] Aram Terzan, "The evolution of Armenia's foreign policy identity", in Kornely Kakachia and Alexander Markarov (eds.), *Values and Identity as Sources of Foreign Policy in Armenia and Georgia,* Tbilisi: Universal Publishing House, 2016, p. 148.

[6] Rory Maclean, "Heroic Adventures in Transnistria", *New Eastern Europe,* No. 4 (IX),2013, p. 158.

binary either-or logic conducive to deep political rifts and ruptures, and it is these endeavours that are of primary interest to the present analysis.

Two questions in particular are addressed at this point:

1) How far might these in-between identities and the concomitant policy practices lead these countries and how sustainable will these hybrid models will be in mid-/long-run?
2) Will the multiple areas of overlapping EU-Russian policies, interests and jurisdictions require Moscow and Brussels to change their policy tools and power resources?

In tackling these questions, most of the attention is focused on Moldova and Armenia, but with reference to the experiences of Georgia and Ukraine as well.

The empirical base includes primary (official documents, statements and speeches) and secondary (media) sources in English and Russian languages, as well as interviews with experts (policymakers, scholars, civil society activists, journalists) conducted during fieldwork in Georgia (n=10), Ukraine (n=10), Moldova (n=10) and Armenia (n=10) in the summer of 2017.

1.   Hybridity in the Common Neighbourhood

This paper defines hybridity through a set of characteristics of post-Soviet transformation that allow for co-existence of different political features and cultural trends, including those that in certain contexts might be seen as contradictory to each other. The post-Soviet region in this respect may be addressed as a peculiar and paradoxical combination of archaic forms of social, economic and cultural practices, on the one hand, and a post-modern de-ideologisation (the proverbial end of 'grand narratives'), with the ensuing fluidity and uncertainty of most of the forms of political identification. It is this mix of seemingly hardly compatible types of policy practices and power relations that defines the high volatility of political processes in many of these countries, and multiple U-turns in their foreign policy orientations. Examples are Moldova's fluctuation from a 'soft balancing' between Moscow and Brussels under Vladimir Voronin's presidency to the drastic shift towards explicitly pro-EU policies in 2009, followed by the rise of pro-Russian forces and the subsequent presidency of Igor Dodon since 2016. Georgia too went through a series of U-turns from the nationalist leadership of Zviad Gamsakhurdia in the early 1990s to a more balanced presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze, followed by the 'Rose Revolution' and the ascension to power of Mikhail Saakashvili, whose trajectory in a matter of years transformed Georgia from a pragmatic partner of Moscow in 2004 to Russia's enemy in 2008. The rise and fall of the "Orange coalition" in Ukraine, its electoral defeat by the Moscow-friendly Viktor Yanukovich and his deposition as a result of the EuroMaidan of 2013-14 attests to the high turbulence in Ukrainian politics as well, which the Ukrainian political analyst Volodymyr Gorbach terms an "unfinished revolution"[7] – an idea that again, albeit in a different context, points to the incompleteness of many political characteristics of the post-Soviet transformation.

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[7] Volodymyr Gorbach, "Незавершена революція", Ukrainskiy Interest web portal, 1 December 2017.

Important elements of these transitory complexities are relatively vague and blurred political loyalties. Being considered as a Moscow-loyal, President Voronin ultimately refused to sign the Kozak memorandum drafted in the Kremlin as the basis for the settlement of the conflict in Transnistria. By the same token, President Shevardnadze, being very close to Moscow in many respects, left open doors for cooperation with NATO and the EU. Moscow was able to prevent the pro-EU drift of yet another ally Viktor Yanukovich, but at a high price of forcing him to abandon the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU and thus provoking a deep political crisis in Ukraine with global security consequences.

In a general sense, the high political volatility in the post-Soviet countries can be explained by the complexities of their nation building. More specifically, the most substantial element of this complexity is the disharmony between political identity as a system of loyalties and sympathies, ethnicity, the institution of citizenship and religious affiliations. For example, Georgia and Moldova reveal meaningful contradictions between the idea of (re)building nation states and religious loyalties largely influenced by (and associated with) the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Besides, in Moldova one may see disconnections between political identities and citizenship in the sense that the possession of Romanian passports does not necessarily define pro-Russian or pro-EU sympathies of its holders.

An illustrative example of the post-Soviet hybridity is Georgian identity: "de-Sovietisation is part of Georgia's efforts to join the EU"[8], but Georgian sympathies towards Stalin, with their strong nationalist roots, are quite strong in the society as well. This bifurcation is exacerbated by the precarious European identity of Georgians: "During the different periods in its history, Georgia has been the part of the Persian and Ottoman Empires, the Mongolian and Russian Empires, and the Soviet Union; but Europe has hardly ever been involved. Thus, saying that Europe is a natural habitat for Georgia and that its people aspire to go 'back' to Europe, is only loosely related to the actual course of Georgian history."[9] As a Georgian expert argues, European identity in this country is not based on "cultural appeal, values and norms; rather people are drawn to the economic prosperity that is perceived as a result of a deeper cooperation between Georgia and the EU".[10] As for the political meanings of the institution of citizenship, there are two competing – yet co-existing - narratives in Georgia – a liberal, pro-Western one grounded in civic identity, and "ethno-religious national narrative"[11] based on the values of ethnicity and religion.

Against this backdrop, to properly analyse the post-Soviet reality on the ground, a new understanding of hybridity is needed– not only as a characteristic of political systems, but also

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[8] Ana Dabrundashvili, "Shadows of Joseph Stalin", *New Eastern Europe,* N 3 (VIII), 2013, p.45.

[9] Ibid.

[10] See Levan Kakhisvili, "Accounting for the "selfless" self-perception among the Georgian public", in Kornely Kakachia and Alexander Markarov (eds), *Values and Identity as Sources of Foreign Policy in Armenia and Georgia*, Tbilisi: Universal Publishing House, 2016, p. 77.

[11] Tamar Pataraia, "The civic dimension of Georgian national identity and its influence on foreign policy", in Kornely Kakachia and Alexander Markarov (eds.), *Values and Identity as Sources of Foreign Policy in Armenia and Georgia*, Tbilisi: Universal Publishing House,2016, p.94.

as an in-between cultural positioning with meaningful political effects. As any type of diversity, cultural hybridity may have various effects – it might be conducive to the building of a civic nation where ethnic identity would not be the key criteria of belonging to the nation, but it can also lead to separatism, which is particularly dangerous if supported or ignited from the outside.

Speaking about how in-between identities trigger institutional effects, one needs to see a wider picture of the post-Soviet political space. Most of these countries have all the institutions central to democracy (elections, separation of powers, civil society organisations, the media), but their functioning is a far cry from European standards. All of them consider their national identities European by culture, history and geography, yet the political distance from EU norms and standards of democracy might be quite substantial. This ambiguity expands the space for manoeuvring: Armenia – a member of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) – continues to develop relations with the EU and NATO; and Moldova – a country that signed an AA and a DCFTA (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement), and was a pioneer in enjoying a visa-free regime with the EU – under Dodon's presidency is increasingly leaning towards Moscow.

Ukrainian and Georgian hybridities manifest themselves in a symbiotic co-existence of strong pro-European drive – basically engendered by a consistent desire to break away from Russian patronage – with the resilient attraction of the nation state as the locus of power and the embodiment of ethnic/national authenticity. In particular, Georgia's identity combines a clear sympathy and penchant towards Europeanisation (presupposing liberal reforms) with the strong attachment to Orthodoxy with its obvious conservative underpinnings. Yet the nation-state model of governance, with the inherent conservative momentum, contradicts the overwhelmingly liberal logic of EU-led supra-national integration. The Georgian Orthodox Church, the most trustworthy institution in the country, shares a lot in its conservative and Western-sceptic rhetoric with the ROC, which only adds to the ambiguity mentioned above. In Ukraine the ROC, widely referred to in the official discourse as the Church of the intruding country, is a major Orthodox institution whose parishes outnumber those of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv patriarchate. A specific element of hybridity in Ukraine is the proliferation of the practices of dual citizenship as an effect of policies of neighbouring countries – Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria and Russia aimed at distributing national passports or ID cards (*Karta Polaka*) in addition to the pre-existing Ukrainian citizenship.

Moldova is an interesting example of a country where the redrawing of borders in the past (i.e. geopolitical and territorial reshuffling) caused strong hybridising effects in cultural and political domains. The country's strong connections to both Russia and Romania unleashed deep splits in national identity.[12] In the meantime, Moldova is an illustrative story of the fragility of

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[12] Rumer, Eugen, "Moldova between Russia and the West: a Delicate Balance", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 23 May 2017.

'successful' Europeanisation[13]: the electoral victory of the Alliance for European Integration could not drive this country away from the oligarchic 'state capture' and corruption scandals. The presidency in Moldova – as exemplified by Igor Dodon's tenure – is not a consolidating institution, but rather a divisive one. To this one should add the spill-over effects of the events in Ukraine – an anticipation of possible political destabilisation and the growing uncertainty when it comes to security.[14] As a result, not much room is left in Moldovan politics for value-based policies – the country incarnates a post-Soviet, post-ideological and post-normative regime of power, with pragmatic considerations (economics, finances and security) trumping any possible ideational allegiances. The widespread practice of double citizenship adds to the existence of multiple zones of shifting loyalties and dislocated identities. For example, it is imaginable that Moldovan holders of Romanian passports would not necessarily be pro-European when it comes to their voting preferences. This type of post-political and even post-national citizenship is primordially a matter of practical convenience, which distinguishes Moldova from, for instance, the Baltic states where – especially in Estonia and Latvia – post-Soviet citizenship was closely associated with political loyalty to the nation states that regained their independence.

Religion is another factor that adds to the hybridity of Moldovan identity. The role of the ROC in the country is huge: most of the parishes in Moldova are controlled by the Moscow Patriarchy, which, according to the testimonies of many Moldovan experts, is more a political than a theological institution, and is widely known for using religious ceremonies to propagate the doctrine of the Russian world. Therefore, clashes between the 'pro-European' and 'pro-Russian' standpoints hide a much more complex picture of numerous conflicting affiliations and disconnections involving issues of ethnicity, religious affiliation and citizenship.

Armenia – sharing with Moldova an in-between manoeuvring in search for its own system of multiple balances – is different from the three countries that signed AAs and strengthened their relations with the EU through visa-free agreements in at least one important respect: it did not lose territory to separatists. On the contrary, it supported the de-facto second Armenian state in Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory that before 1991 was administratively part of Azerbaijan. Against this background, Armenian foreign policy choices are more geopolitical than normative, which is predetermined by its complicated neighbourhood, including locked borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan. In these conditions the EU appears as one of few options to balance Russia's influence. In the Armenian discourse there is a feeling of belonging to a cultural space of Europe from which the Armenian nation state is distanced, if not detached geographically.[15] As an interviewee in Yerevan put it, "we are Europeans even if Europe does not know that".

In the meantime, Armenian mainstream discourse vehemently discards any meaningful anti-Russian attitudes in this country, preferring to see them as marginal and politically insignificant.

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[13] Dovile Suslite (ed.), "Экономические Вызовы, Стоящие Перед Украиной и Молдовой на Пути в ЕС", Eastern European Study Center and Foreign Policy Association, Chisinau, November 2015, p.16.

[14] *Glavkom*, "Угроза пророссийского переворота в Молдове. К чему готовиться Украине?", 13 January 2017.

[15] Alexandr Iskanderian, ЕАЭС - не интеграционный проект, это форма подтверждения лояльности России, Yerevan: the Caucasus Institute, 22 November 2015.

Moreover, as another interviewee in Yerevan said, "we are not Georgians – we don't contradistinguish Russia and Europe". For Armenia, Russia is a security guarantor, while the EU is an economic partner. Within the CSTO, Armenia tried to offer its experience of international peacekeeping: "The self-sufficiency stems from Armenia's expanding capacity to participate in peacekeeping operations separate from its role as a member of the Russian-dominated CSTO and distinct from its security partnership with Russia".[16] In the security terrain, this is exactly what defines Armenia's attempts to diversify its external communication under the condition of heavy dependence on Russia.

2. Hybrid hegemonies: The EU and Russia

The academic literature is replete with realist and geopolitical approaches to a plethora of issues pertaining to EU-Russian interactions in the common neighbourhood area. A Russian expert, for example, argues that the EU is driving towards a more geopolitical – as opposed to pragmatic – approach to its eastern neighbours.[17] However, the EU's and Russia's policies towards their common neighbours, being undoubtedly hegemonic, in many respects remain incomplete, which may be understood as a structural impediment to hegemonic impositions from either of two major power centres – Moscow and Brussels – due to the hybrid nature of societies forming the neighbourhood area. By the same token, EU and Russian policies themselves might be approached from the perspective of hybridity, which in this specific context means a complex structure of hegemony without one single logic behind it.

From a practical perspective, the EU and Russia have their own advantages. The EU acts through a variety of channels, thus combining diverse forms of influence – through the mechanisms of official agreements, state-based policies and the multiplicity of non-state actors involved, including foundations, professional associations, think tanks, and so forth. Russia, for its part, is stronger in non-democratic environments dealing with opaque and often corrupt interest groups. This section discusses the EU's and Russia's hegemonic strategies in their complexity and multiplicity, and from the viewpoint of their hybrid nature.

2.1 Europeanisation as a hegemonic strategy

The hybrid structure of political identities and affiliations in countries of common neighbourhood is a serious challenge to the EU's policy in its eastern neighbourhood. In the meantime, Brussels' incomplete hegemony stems from the very limited nature of EU external projection, which puts a premium on norms, values, rules and institutions, and intentionally downplays the role of coercive instruments.

One of the lessons of EaP implementation is that the EU failed to duly understand that elite groups in some post-Soviet countries rhetorically used pro-Europe/pro-democracy narratives

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[16] Richard Giragosyan, "Peacekeeping Contributor Profile: Armenia", Providing for Peacekeeping website, November 2015.

[17] Andrey Deviatkov, "Восточное партнерство ЕС: геополитика побеждает прагматику?", *Evrazia Expert*, 19 June 2017

for attaining three practical goals having very little to do with Europeanisation. First, in their role as EU political partners and promoters of EU-compatible agenda, they aimed at receiving immunity and impunity from criticism, if not a *carte blanche,* from the West for their actions. As Andreas Umland argues, the clan-like system in Ukraine reproduces itself under European slogans.[18] Second, many post-Soviet elites were eager to obtain palpable material advantages from the EU and its member states, including new funding. Third, they need EU backing for boosting their independence and autonomy – that might contravene EU's 'post-sovereign' approach – "in order to ease their dependence on Russia".[19] As seen from the elites' perspective, this strategy was quite rational and effective in the short run. However, the long-run result was widespread disappointment in societies not only with local political elites due to multiple corruption charges, but also with the EU that supported these elites and turned a blind eye in the meantime on their wrongdoings.

Evidence of the EU's lack of institutional resources in projecting its normative power eastward is most apparent in recent changes in electoral laws in Armenia, Moldova and Georgia. Despite the dissimilar trajectories of these changes, none of them was aimed at improving the quality of democratic governance, but – as consensually understood by policy experts – at securing the power base of the ruling elites.[20] In the words of the EU's official statement concerning the 2017 Moldovan changes in electoral rules, "we continue to share the view of the Venice Commission and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights that the proposed changes raise serious concerns regarding effective democracy in the current political context".[21] Other political voices in Europe equally condemned the new Moldovan legislation.[22]

Thus, it is hard to establish a solid and unambiguous connection between EU policies – including the visa-free decision[23] – and domestic transformation in Moldova. On a more general note one may say that the pro-EU enthusiasm of 2009, when the Alliance for European Integration came to power in Chisinau, transformed in a matter of a few years into disappointment and disillusionment that created a fertile ground for Russian interference. As observed by Moldovan interviewed in Chisinau: "The EU is viewed through the prism of allegedly pro-European politicians who monopolised the representation and interpretation of the idea of Europe… All these years since 2009 the EU tried to dissuade us from criticising the government formed upon the Alliance for European Integration, and convince us 'to give them a chance'."

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[18] Andreas Umland, "Сегодня клановая система в Украине воспроизводит себя под европейскими лозунгами", *UkrLifeTV*, 27 June 2017.

[19] Oscar Pardo Sierra, "No man's land? A comparative analysis of the EU and Russia's influence in the Southern Caucasus", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 44, 2011, p.242.

[20] "Change of Electoral Systems in EaP Countries: Bolstering Dictators or Causing Maidan", *Moldovan Politics*, 29 June. 2017.

[21] Federica Mogherini and Johannes Hahn, "Statement by the HR/VP Mogherini and Commissioner Hahn on the amendments to the electoral legislation in the Republic of Moldova", European Union External Action Service, 21 July 2017.

[22] European People's Party, Moldova's New Political System – a Blow to Democracy, EPP Press Release, 20 July 2017.

[23] Denis Cenusa, "Moldova after three years of visa-free regime with EU and new European realities", IPN News Agency, 18 April 2017.

After the 2009 electoral success of the Alliance for European Integration, the EU aimed at "building Moldova into the success story" of Europeanisation, constantly praising the pro-EU government as effective and "European". However, this didn't prevent the society from huge disappointment with Europe, as expressed by another Moldovan interviewed: "This sounds unbelievable, but in the process of system transformation, the return to the previous system and subsequently a refusal to further pass on power is more probable."[24] Many Moldovan intellectuals themselves recognise that the country is getting more conservative and patriarchal, and its low living standards stimulate mass migration.[25] Institutions of the state are subdued to practices emerging from the shadow, if not criminal, businesses that operate widely throughout the country (neutralisation of opponents, cleaning of political field, blackmail, money laundering through sophisticated financial schemes, etc.). Another hot point is the debate about amendments to the Moldovan legislation complicating the operational activity of local NGOs: "The proposed provisions are contrary to the AA between the Republic of Moldova and the EU, which encourages the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, including civil society organizations, in developing policies and reforms in the Republic of Moldova".[26]

Against this background there are strong voices arguing, in the words of one interviewee, that "power in Moldova has been captured by Vlad Plahotniuc, who is neither a democrat nor a reformer and who, under the cover of false pro-European rhetoric, is petrifying the weaknesses of the state".[27] Plahotniuc tried to pragmatically monopolise the pro-European flank of Moldovan politics, but by so doing he, as some analysts think, turns Moldova further away from European standards,[28] which creates fertile ground for Russia.[29] As a Russia-loyal journalist in Moldova mentioned in an interview, "the European vector was non-existent in Moldova… There are only business interests here, no ideologies at all" – a post-political milieu that is quite convenient from the vantage point of projecting Moscow's interests.

In Armenia, with all its dissimilarity from Moldova, the EU faces the same type of trouble attesting to the very limited nature of EU influence over domestic transformation. The shift from the semi-presidential system, with elections part proportional representation/part first-past-the-post, to a parliamentary republic with a full proportional representation system, is widely assessed as a "reform from above", and even as a "counter-revolutionary putsch from above aimed at creating a one-party state".[30] For example, the Armenian government received from the EU €7 million for the purchase of special electronic equipment used during the parliamentary elections, yet afterwards refused to engage with the EU-initiated debate on the

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[24] Pawel Kowal, "The Moldovan Gambit", *New Eastern Europe,* N 4 (IX), 2013, p. 59.

[25] Nicoleta Esinencu, "A Proud Moldovan? New Eastern Europe", N 4 (IX), 2013, pp. 179-180,.

[26] Foreign Policy Association of Moldova, "Declaration: The attempt to limit foreign funding of NGOs endangers the functioning of democracy in Moldova and cannot, under any circumstances", 11 July 2017.

[27] Kamil Calus and Wojciech Kononchuk, "Explaining Oligarchic Moldova", Carnegie Europe, 4 May 2017.

[28] Vladimir Soloviov, "For Moldova's journalists, surveillance is the new norm", *Open Democracy*, 7 April 2017.

[29] Vladimir Plahotniuc, "An East-West Flashpoints that Need More Attention", *The Hill*, 24 July 2017.

[30] Ingar Solty and Davit Stepanyan, "Post-democracy in Armenia? How the New Constitution will Depoliticize Armenian Society", *Open Democracy*, 25 November 2015.

quality of the electoral process, accusing the EU envoy in Yerevan of interference in Armenia's domestic affairs.[31]

Brussels, however, has been obliged to adjust its policies to the new commitments and obligations undertaken by Yerevan after its refusal to sign the AA. In 2013 the Armenian government proposed a shorter version of this document as a compromise, but the EU initially rejected this text, insisting on an 'either all or nothing' principle. After that Brussels adopted a more flexible approach and agreed to renegotiate the agreement, which was ultimately signed in November 2017.

2.2   Russia's Neighbourhood Strategies

Russia's toolkit for dealing with its 'near abroad' looks more diverse than the EU's. It includes two pillars – Eurasian integration and the idea of the Russian World, which embraces ethnic, religious and linguistic dimensions – that are absent in the case of the EU. Besides, as Russia's support for military insurgency in eastern Ukraine made clear, the Russian World ideology might have a substantial military component – again, non-existent in the EU. Nevertheless, as many experts conclude, the overtly militarised imperial *Realpolitik* brings scant palpable results to Moscow.[32]

Indeed, from the geopolitical perspective, Russia's hegemony in the near abroad looks like a series of policy improvisations lacking any coherent or consistent design. The Kremlin vociferously proclaims the South Caucasus its sphere of interest, but in the meantime has withdrawn its military infrastructure from Adjara (Georgia) and Quabala (Azerbaijan). Moscow was fully aware of the negotiations that Viktor Yanukovich was conducting for years between its satellite Ukraine and the EU on the AA and DCFTA, but did nothing to clarify the way Russia understands its interests were being affected by this agreement. The same happened with Armenia: Russia abruptly reconsidered its de-facto disregard of Yerevan's intention to use the EaP for qualitatively boosting relations with the EU, and at the very last moment started pressuring President Serzh Sargsyan to prevent the AA from materialising. Moreover, Moscow – despite its insistence on being taken seriously when it comes to post-Soviet neighbours – failed to capitalise on the EU's readiness to conduct the trilateral EU-Russia-Ukraine negotiations. Due to inadequately justified and artificially elevated demands from Moscow, the talks ultimately failed in 2015, and the trilateral format discredited itself, largely to Russia's disadvantage.

As a result of this chronic inconsistency, Russia is gradually losing influence in what it considers its 'sphere of vital interests'. Paradoxically, Russia – whose government tends to see the world basically through a geopolitical prism – is in some respects outperformed by the EU, an actor that by no means perceives itself in geopolitical terms. The vulnerability and weakness of Russia's policies to a large extent stem from its geopolitically self-defeating policy of aligning

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[31] Nana Sahakian and Astghik Bedevian, "EU Envoy Rejects Criticism from Armenian Government", 2017.

[32] Pavel Luzin, "The Caucasus: Imperial Realpolitik or Historical Retreat", *Intersections*, 7 December 2015.

with secondary actors and simultaneously losing ground in its relations with more important ones. Geopolitically, relations with Georgia are more important than with Abkhazia and – moreover – South Ossetia; relations with Chisinau are more important than with Tiraspol or Komrat, and relations with Kyiv are more important than with Donetsk or Luhansk. The same logic, by the way, can be applied to Russia's European policies: Moscow in fact exchanged normal and stable working relations with power holders in France and Germany for directly identifying Russia's interests with second-ranking (at best) anti-establishment forces. The priority given to often marginal and peripheral groups seems to be a major factor compromising Russia's geopolitical positions in a wider Europe. As a result, Russia lacks an effective long-term strategy in its so-called near abroad. Russia can contribute to splitting societies along the pre-existing divisive lines (for example, in Moldova), but it can't efficiently play a consolidating game, basically due to the lack of a strong normative appeal.

The deficiency of Russia's normative strategy became particularly evident in August 2008, when it recognised the two break-away Georgian territories. This political gesture was an abrupt departure from the previous strategy that Russia tried to implement within the global framework of its normative stance, which included two main pillars. First, Russia acted out of its consensually recognised status as the successor of the Soviet Union, which initially was interpreted in Moscow more from the viewpoint of Russia's special responsibilities rather than extraordinary rights. In accordance with this logic, Russian troops in Georgian territory received international legitimacy as peacekeepers. Secondly, Russia consistently insisted on the inappropriateness of instigating independence movements and fuelling separatism within sovereign polities. In accordance with this logic, Moscow not only considered Abkhazia and South Ossetia legal parts of Georgia, but also imposed sanctions upon them.

In August 2008, both pillars were either destroyed or significantly reconfigured. By applying military force, Russia first shifted its discourse from responsibilities to the right to intervene. Second, by recognising the separatist entities, the Kremlin forfeited its previously earned normative capital and the reputation as the most consistent advocate of the principle of territorial integrity of states. The trajectory that Moscow has chosen to follow has driven it from the principled non-recognition of break-away territories to recognition and then – in 2014 – to the annexation of Crimea where separatism was almost non-existent before Russia's interference. Russia's collective self, both national and imperial, started symbolically appropriating territories beyond national borders. Crimea and *Novorossiya* are two recent examples of this proclivity to refer to neighbouring lands as allegedly central – if not constitutive – of Russia's sense of identity. This possessive feeling, being a sign of a deep non-self-sufficiency, can be extended to the entire Ukraine, a country that many Russians consider as their subaltern, yet – paradoxically – in the meantime as an indispensable element of the proverbial Russian World.

From a global geopolitical perspective, this devolution produced disastrous effects: from a member of the G8 and a strategic partner of both the EU and – even though only verbally – NATO, Russia turned into an object of harsh international criticism, economic and political sanctions, and found itself in a situation of political isolation vis-à-vis the West. It is this situation

that Russia exploited to a full swing debunking the 'European choice' of its neighbours as a rhetorical cover for interest-based group policies of personal enrichment. Moreover, Russia entangled itself in a knot of unresolvable controversies: it wishes to de-legitimise the West from a normative perspective, but in the meantime is eager to legitimise its Ukraine policy among Western governments and opinion-makers.

A good example of the geopolitically dichotomist thinking is the following statement made by a Moscow-based policy analyst: "The crucial question is whether we consider Georgia completely lost for Russia and the Russian world. If this is the case, the best strategy would be to arrange a referendum on incorporation of South Ossetia into Russia and then to fend off with a well-equipped border against an inimical country. But if this is not the case, we should think of a strategy of extended dialogue with Georgia, keeping Abkhazia and South Ossetia as Russia's allies".[33] The question is still pending.

In Moldova, Russian policy has developed under the impact of two political failures. The first painful episode was the fiasco with the Kozak memorandum that was ready for signing but at the very last moment rejected by the President Vladimir Voronin under US pressure. The second episode of unsuccessful policy was the mission of Sergey Naryshkin, who in December 2010 visited Chisinau in his capacity as the head of presidential administration. Naryshkin's unofficial arrival was meant to create a left-centric coalition of the Communist Party and Democratic Party under Russian mediation.[34] These two examples show Russia's weakness as a mediator in political clashes in Moldova. Yet even in Transnistria, as some journalists suppose, "Russia in fact decides close to nothing. It preferred to detach itself from the development over there. The pro-Russian orientation in Transnistria is a matter of imagery. In the future it can re-orient to the EU, if needed".[35] For example, Russia did nothing to avoid conflict between the 'Sherif' group and Evgeniy Shevchuk in Tiraspol, preferred not to interfere and observed at a distance Shevchuk's escape from Transnistria to Chisinau in June 2017. Even with a pro-Russian president as the head of state, Moscow can do little when Russian diplomats are expelled from Chisinau, or the Moldovan Foreign Ministry declared Vice Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin *persona non grata*. Therefore, Russia does not always meet the high political expectations of its clientele and effectively interfere.

Many analysts refer to these shortcomings to make a case for the fragility of Russia's hegemonic (im)positions in Moldova; some authors argue that Moscow lacks a policy of its own, instead is simply trying to fill the vacuum left by Brussels.[36] My argument is different, however: Moscow has too many policies that might contradict and potentially block each other.

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[33]Aleksei Fenenko, Final igry: Rossii nuzhno opredelitsia v otnoshenii Gruzii, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 20 April 2016.

[34] Moldavskie SMI: Naryshkin priekhal v Kishiniov, chtoby razvalit' Alians za evrointegratsiyu, December 2010; Mark Solovoiv. Pravda o provable levotsentristskoi koalitsii, ili Kto torpediroval missiyu Sergeya Naryshkina, *ENews*, 13 February 2011.

[35] Aleksandr Rybin. Pridnestrovie: Moskva teriaet kontrol', *Gazeta.ru*, 17 July 2017.

[36] Elkhan Nuriyev, "Russia, the EU and the South Caucasus: Forging an Efficient Over-Arching Cooperative Regional Security Scheme", *Connections. The Quarterly Journal,* spring 2015, p. 59.

Russia's first policy boils down to 'disciplining' Moldova by creating impediments for bilateral cooperation (such as sanctions) and then lifting them as a political resource, thus investing in relations with loyal politicians (such as Igor Dodon) giving them a chance to publicly claim that they can deal with Moscow and tackle the most controversial issues annoying Moldova. The two cases in point are restrictions imposed against Moldovan wine in the Russian market and complications for Moldovans working in Russia. The rise of Dodon as a political leader is illustrative of this type of policy: in his capacity as leader of the Socialist Party, prior to his presidency, he met in Moscow with the head of Russian Migration Service Konstantin Romadanovsky with whom he has settled the judicial issues concerning dozens of hundreds of Moldovans working illegally in Russia. By taking a permissive stand, Russia polished the political credentials of Dodon in Moldova and simultaneously tried to diminish the importance of the visa-free agreement with the EU by showing the attractiveness of the Russian labour market.[37] Later Russia lifted its earlier reservations and agreed to accept Moldova's participation in two free trade areas – but only when Dodon came to power in Chisinau.[38] Moreover, Dodon received a chance to directly associate himself with Putin as a strong leader who was the only foreign head of state attending the May 9 military parade in Moscow in 2017.[39]

Secondly, in communicating with Chisinau, Moscow plays the Eurasianist card, and does it in two different ways. It supported pro-Eurasianist sympathies in Transnistria and Gagauzia in 2014, implying a possible integration with the Russian-sponsored Eurasian Union.[40] Another channel for Eurasianist ideas in Moldova is the activity of several Russian-affiliated organisations (such as the local branch of the Izborsk Club[41]) and individuals (such as Yuriy Roshka, the most active promoter of Alexander Dugin's ideas in Moldova). The Eurasianist discourse as articulated by Dugin himself in Moldova is a hybrid appeal that contains both right-wing/conservative and leftist ingredients. This Eurasianist blend of stereotypes and misperceptions includes statements that can be easily disproven empirically – such as, in particular, the case of Dugin's assertions that the EU completely disregards issues of social justice, or that the populations of Greece, Romania and Bulgaria are eager to leave the EU. But this discursive mixture has more consumers – and therefore more chances for circulation – in normatively de-politicised societies, which tend to be politically inert and insensitive to value-based narratives. Paradoxically, Dugin's and Roshka's appeals to "salvaging the souls" as the top policy priority for the "Eurasian alternative" might have some audience in post-political (even post-democratic) social and cultural environments, with disillusionment in the material benefits of European democracy and the search for an alternative illiberal identification.

Positively assessing the operation of the Izborsk Club in Moldova, Roshka, a leading Moldovan Eurasianist, called for a hybrid trans-ideological consensus, based on two pillars that share anti-liberal views: "genuinely left and genuinely right/conservative intellectuals and politicians". On

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[37] "Igor Dodon proviol vstrechu s Moldavskimi sootechestvennikami v Moskve", *Actualitati*, 3 November 2014.

[38] Vladimir Solovoiv, "Vishenka na torte", *Kommersant*, 30 November 2016.

[39] "Moldovan President Calls EU Aid Geopolitical Assistance", *Radio Free Europe*, 18 May 2017.

[40] Vasily Kashirin, "Gagauzia ne vyzhivaet – ona zhiviot", *EurasiaInform*, 16 January 2014.

[41] http://izborsk.md/

the left side Roshka imagines issues of social justice and anti-colonial struggle against the US-based oligarchic elite, while on the right-wing flank, he sees the accentuation of cultural and civilizational issues. In his account, Moldova can be a pilot project of a Russia-patronised "Eastern Civilization".[42] On a different account, he claimed that "there are no more left and right, only different shades of patriotism".[43] This makes the Eurasianist message sent to Moldova a hybrid of leftist resistance to capitalism (anti-oligarchic rhetoric and references to "people's interests") and civilizational conservatism/traditionalism (including anti-secularism and anti-nationalism).

At this point, the most interesting is Dugin's and Roshka's insistence on "Moldovan-Romanian common cultural and philosophic legacy" as a basis for the national conservative revival ("We are interested in strengthening Moldovan and Romanian identity as part of a single civilization."[44]). This argument, first, contradicts the logic of supporters of federalisation in Moldova[45] based on the stimulation of anti-Moldovan and anti-Romanian discourse in Transnistria. Second, premium place by Eurasianists on the Moldovan-Romanian cultural, civilizational and religious unity does not sit well with the proponents of the Russian World in Moldova. In this sense the Russian World represents a separate policy (or a set of policies) aimed at culturally distinguishing Transnistria as an island of Russian language and culture endangered by the so-called Romanisation.[46] Dodon's openness to discuss a return to Cyrillic transcription of the Moldovan language[47] in this context is not only a cultural, but a political gesture as well.

Yet, of course, each of the policies briefly introduced above – the "Eurasian pathway" or the Russian World – is not only about narratives and public debates. Many Russian discourse-makers play more than one role in Moldova. For example, Alexey Martynov, Director of the Moscow-based International Institute of Newest States, who in 2015 was detained at the Chisinau airport and denied entry to Moldova, is known less as a specialist in policy analysis and more as a person close to authorities in Tiraspol, which explains the fact that he has been awarded a medal of honour in Tiraspol.[48] In a similar way, the authorities in Chisinau banned Sergey Mokshantsev, Director of the local branch of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies (RISI), from entering Moldova. His organisation has a strong reputation of being in close touch with the Russian government and intelligence community.[49] RISI directly called upon the Kremlin to recognise the independence of Transnistria.[50] It is telling that the opening of the RISI

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[42] Yurii Roshka, "Kvoprosu razrabotki natsional'noi idei v Moldove", *Katehon*, 4 April 2016.

[43] Yurii Roshka, "Dugin i moldavskaya natsional'naya idea, *Sputnik Moldova*, 30 July 2016.

[44] "Moldova predvybornaya: liberalov – za skobki", *Direktiva Dugina*, 27 July 2016.

[45] "Igor Dodon: Federalizatsiya – edinstvenniy sposob sokhranit' Pridnestrovye i Gagauziyu", *Actualitati*, 26 May 2017.

[46] Nikolay Svetlanov, "Rossiya i Pridnestrovie", *Zavtra*, 5 May 2016.

[47] "Igor Dodon. Eto Zapad govorit vam kritikovat' Prezidenta", *NewsMaker*, 22 June 2017.

[48] Irina Ivashkina "Rossiiskiy politolog Alexei Martynov ob'yavlen personoi non-grata v Moldove", *NewsMaker*, 13 August 2015.

[49] "Glave Dnestrovsko-Prutskogo tsentra RISI zapretili v'ezd v Moldovu", *NewsMaker,* 22 May 2015.

[50] "Direktor RISI prizyvaet vlasti Rossii priznat' nezavisimost' Pridnestrovya", *Basarabia.md*, 29 May 2015.

Center in Tiraspol was staged not as an academic, but rather as an openly political event attended by the head (*bashkan*) of Gagauzia Mikhail Formuzal, the head of Transnistrian government Tatiana Turanskaya and the Foreign Minister of the unrecognised republic Nina Shtansky, along with the Defence Minister Aleksandr Lukianenko, the archbishop of Tiraspol and Dubossary Savva, as well as representatives of social movements "Motherland – Eurasian Union" and "Our Serbia".[51]

The Priznanie ("Recognition") Foundation funded by Moscow is another hybrid actor that serves more as a partisan platform for influencing public opinion and giving the floor to a wide range of Russia-friendly speakers – from the former President Vladimir Voronin[52] to the former head of Transnistria Evgeniy Shevchuk – than as an independent unit.[53] Priznanie operates as a testing ground for identifying the most promising Moldovan politicians worthy of support from Moscow, and in the meantime as a litmus test for their loyalty to Moscow.[54] The foundation also pledged to support those Russian-language media in Moldova that face so-called discrimination,[55] thus in practice investing its resources in one of the Russian World's policy priorities.

In Georgia, Russia uses a similar set of policies, relying on a local clientele group of Russian loyalists reproducing Putin's discourse and customising it for local conditions.[56] These tactics include over-securitisation of the situation on the ground (for example, related to hyper-dramatisation of conflictual elements of relations with Turkey) and the propagation of Kremlin-compatible anti-Western narratives.[57] Another important pillar of the Moscow-translated discourse are the constant appeals to geopolitical pragmatism, as opposed to embracing EU-generated norms and values. In particular, using its support groups and individual speakers in Georgia, Moscow claims that Russia's retreat from Georgia would automatically mean a fertile ground for Turkish expansion,[58] and that NATO has much less to offer Georgia than Russia.[59] Russia is portrayed as a friendly country where many Georgians in the past made their names and careers, which adds a strong nostalgic element to Russian propaganda.[60]

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[51] "V Tiraspole otkrylsia Informatsionniy Tsentr RISI", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Transnistrian Moldovan Republic, 11 March 2014.

[52] "Vladimir Voronin: Buduschee Moldovy – za aktivnym i umelym sovmescheniem dvukh integratsionnykh protsessov", SNG i Evropa, 16 October 2009.

[53] "Rossiiskiy fond 'Priznanie' organizoval seminar ekspertov za Shevchuka", *AVA*, 24 September 2011.

[54] "Rossiikskiy fond 'Priznanie': Za Partiyu Kommunistov gotovy progolosovat' bole poloviny izbiratelei Respubliki Moldova", *Forum*, 4 November 2009.

[55] Rossiiskiy fond 'Priznanie' ne odobryaet, *Terra: Territoria Moldneta*, 28 January 2010.

[56] "Activist: Russia stepping up anti-EU, pro-Eurasian Union efforts in Georgia", *Democracy and Freedom Watch*, 21 August 2015.

[57] "Gruzinskiy ekspert: Izoliatsiya Rossii i izmenenie eyo orientatsii stanet katastrofoi dlia Zapada", The Gorchakov Foundation, 17 April 2016.

[58] «V Gruzii priznalis': Krome Rossii, nas zaschitit' nekomu", *ERR*.

[59] "Jondi Bagaturia: Druzhit' s Rossiei vygodnee, chem s NATO", *Sputnik Gruzia*, 27 May 2016.

[60] «Ekspert: Gruzia byla samoi bogatoi respublikoi v SSSR», *Sputnik Gruzia*, 18 August 2016.

Armenia in this context differs from Moldova and Georgia, since it has chosen to exchange its AA with the EU with the enforced membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. Nevertheless, with all institutional connections to Moscow, Armenian political debate includes issues questioning the efficacy of its pro-Eurasian turn: "Russia faces negative consequences of the fall of world oil prices, paralleled by Western sanctions, which led to the 39% drop of remittances from Armenians working in Russia, and to an 18% drop in export volumes. Therefore, the anticipated benefits of Armenia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union have not so far materialised."[61] Moreover, the April 2016 resumption of hostilities with Azerbaijan boosted the voices in the Armenian society who are doubtful of the expediency of security cooperation with Russia: "It was Aliev who received endless compliments and assurances in eternal friendship. No one considered appropriate to court Yerevan: Armenia has no place to go anyway".[62] Thus, Russia's role in the security sphere in Armenia is not undisputable.[63] Armenia should not count on Russia too much as a key strategic ally, according to Deputy Foreign Minister Shavarsh Kocharyan.[64] He warned that "[n]ot only did Russia not come up with clear support towards Armenia, but high-level Russian officials including Deputy Prime Minister Rogozin made statements that Russia would continue to provide Azerbaijan with modern assault weaponry, part of which was actively used against Armenian forces during the four-day military escalation."[65] Some Armenian political analysts deem it dangerous to rely only on Russia, and call for diversification of foreign policy partners to include the EU and Iran.[66]

As for the reverberations of the Russian World ideas in Armenia, the space for this policy is very limited, which became evident in the very critical reception given to a proposal made by the deputy head of the State Duma to introduce Russian as the second official language in Armenia.[67] One Armenian politician dubbed as a "mental disorder" a suggestion by the Russian Minister of Education to use Cyrillic in all CIS countries,[68] which attests to the strong resistance by the Armenian polity to attempts at Russification.

3.   Options and scenarios

Russia – supported by realist thinkers in the West – claims that the only alternative to spheres of influence would be continuing military conflicts in the whole post-Soviet area. Some authors deem that Russia's legitimation of spheres of influence has already yielded fruit: "Allegedly, Russia has an indirect veto right on the EU's and NATO's expansion policy in its near abroad and

[61] "Gayane Abramyan. Armenia vozobnovila peregovory s Evropeiskim Soyuzom", *InoSmi*, 9 February 2015.

[62] Vladimir Golyshev, "Nepriznannaya Armenia", *Radio Svoboda*, May 7, 2016.

[63] Emma Gabrielyan, "Armenia-NATO Partnership Has Strategic Significance",14 June 2017.

[64] "Our expectations from Russia should not be exaggerated – deputy PM", 29 June 2017.

[65] Benyamin Poghosyan "Commentary: Armenia's Russian Hug", *Common Space*, 14 July 2017.

[66] Anahit Shirinyan, "Armenia Should Strengthen Ties with the EU and Iran", Chatham House, London, 10 March 2016.

[67] "Duma Speaker suggests making Russian official language in Armenia", *MediaMax*, 17 July 2017.

[68] Irina Dzhorbenadze, "Armenia ispugalas' yazykovoi ekspansii Rossii", *RosBalt*, 22 June 2017.

no longer tolerates Western expansion in the former Soviet states."[69] Yet, as this paper has argued, it is the phenomenal hybridity of the post-Soviet states and societies, along with hybrid forms of interaction and blurred lines of identification that make the practical implementation of spheres of influence and other realist schemes impossible. This is exactly what constitutes the most dramatic element of the whole story of post-Soviet transition: most of the post-Soviet countries as they exist nowadays can't be smoothly integrated with either the EU or Russia. Both dominant actors are incapable and often hesitant to fully absorb or incorporate these countries, thus making their political trajectories even more complicated. The territorial division of a wider Europe into spheres of influences looks from the vantage point of this analysis impractical. The crux of the problem – *pace* John Mearsheimer – is not Western discord with Russia's insistence on a new division within a wider Europe, but the impossibility of any form of territorial partitions and divisions in principle. The language of political realism – with Russia's "orbits", "doorsteps" and "backyards", the revitalisation of the concept of 'buffer state' and the explicit 'right-wrong' distinction[70] – is desperately obsolete, at least in this part of the world. The same goes for the advocacy of status-quo policy and the idea of 'red lines' as its conceptual substantiation.[71]

Neither the EU's 'complete hegemony' in the form of full membership for EaP states, nor Russia's monopoly over its near abroad seems to be a feasible policy option. Equally unimaginable is Russia's open and unequivocal identification with the basic norms of Europeanisation. Under these circumstances, several other options can be discussed.

Option 1 is the maintenance of the unsatisfactory status quo, with alternating cycles of the EU's and Russia's reactions to each other's policies. Thus, NATO's indecision at the Bucharest summit of April 2008 was perceived by Moscow as a sign of weakness that (indirectly) paved the way to Russia's military operation against Georgia in August of that year. This war intensified the EU's launch of the EaP, which a few years later led to Russia's heavy pressure over Kyiv (and Yerevan). Consequently, the EuroMaidan was a response to Ukraine's (temporal) deviation from the European route, followed by the Russia-instigated anti-Maidan, the annexation of Crimea and EU sanctions against Russia. This scenario implies indirect communication through mutual reactions to the moves of each other: Russia and the EU in this case build their policies via constant reciprocal retaliations.

This option is basically guided by the logic of Russia's intransigent view of any forms of EU institutional presence in the post-Soviet space as "not just as contradicting (Moscow's. – A.M.) interests, but as being bluntly anti-Russian… (which – A.M.) only increases Russia's concerns about the EU's ambitions and actions in the post-Soviet space, including through targeted EaP states. Despite the obvious scope for economic linkages, chances are low to see in the foreseeable future the post-Soviet space as a space of EU-Russia cooperation. In the future,

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[69] David Matsaberidze, "Russia vs. EU/US through Georgia and Ukraine", *Connections. The Quarterly Journal*, spring 2015, p. 86.

[70] John Mersheimer, "Don't Arm Ukraine", *New York Times*, 8 February 2015.

[71] Taras Kuzio, "When an academic ignored inconvenient facts", *New Eastern Europe*, 21 June 2016.

sharp competition and protectionism will determine economic relations between Russia and the EU in the post- Soviet space."[72] Under this narrative of confrontation, Russia will continue looking to debilitate the EU by supporting non-mainstream parties in Europe (mainly national conservative, but also leftist), thus attacking European unity and solidarity. Concomitantly, in its post-Soviet neighbourhood Russia will invest in relations with the most Eurosceptic and anti-European parties and groups.

In this situation, the EU might pursue a policy of 'benign neglect' of the Eurasian Economic Union, indirectly obliging Russia take ever greater commitments and obligations towards common neighbours, which ultimately might lead to a cul-de-sac and Moscow's 'imperial overstretch'. The EU might ultimately profit – though indirectly - from the vicious circle of financial responsibilities to its satellites that Moscow is already trapped in. Indeed, in the absence of functional and effective soft power, Moscow needs to offer purely material bonuses and advantages to its partners and interlocutors, which eventually might be burdensome to the Russian budget, if implementable at all.

This scenario, however, still implies a danger of escalating the mutually containing moves and entanglements in an endless series of reactions and reciprocation. Therefore, the remaining scenarios will be grounded in a different logic that does not envisage immediate and direct ripostes to the other party's policies, but rather, envisages positive interaction between Moscow and Brussels.

Option 2 is a comeback to the trilateral format and direct talks on conditions and mechanisms of compatibility between implementation of EU-led and Russia-led integrative processes. Some political leaders in post-Soviet countries verbally support this option, yet so far, all attempts to coordinate the EU's and Russia's policies have failed whether in a bilateral format (the Meseberg memorandum on Transnistria signed by Russia and Germany in 2010), in regional organisations or within ad-hoc trilateral working groups (such as the EU-Russia-Ukraine negotiations[73]) –. In the latter case, Russia's strategy ultimately led to the discontinuation of tripartite talks, which demonstrated that Moscow didn't care much about the future potential of this format and was not seriously interested to reproduce it in other situations (in Moldova or Armenia, for instance). Russia did stay in touch with its EU partners over coordinating their policies in Eastern Europe, yet this cooperation had clear limits, mostly set by the Russian side. Perhaps the continuing EU-Russia consultations on the Western Balkans in the context of EU enlargement can serve as a potentially better example that can be replicated in the common neighbourhood as well.[74]

Yet, even without formal negotiations, there is still some – although modest in scope – space for compromises. For example, Moscow de facto accepted the perspective of a parallel

[72] Dmitry Danilov, "EU-Russia Relations in the Post-Soviet Space", in Olga Potemkina (ed.), *The EU Global Strategy: Implications for Russia,* Moscow: Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Science, 2017, pp. 17-24.

[73] The trilateral talks on DCFTA implementation, 21 December 2015.

[74] "Regular EU-Russia Expert Consultations held on Western Balkans and EU Enlargement", Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union, 1 December 2017.

functioning of different "norms of technical regulations" in Moldova, and reduced its demand to Chisinau to abstain from introducing discriminatory measures against Russian agricultural producers and the exchange of customs information.[75] In the security sphere – when it comes to Donbas, Transnistria or Nagorno Karabakh – Russia and the involved EU member states are in direct touch with each other, which might be regarded as a specific form of a multilateral format.

Option 3 can be titled the "Kazakhstan-Armenia model" in the sense that these Russia-loyal countries have signed – apparently without open conflicts with Moscow – cooperation agreements with the EU, which however are consistent with their previous commitments vis-á-vis the Eurasian Economic Union. Following Armenia's example, Belarus also started to talk about a new format of relations with the EU. "Signing an agreement on partnership and cooperation is a matter of a short-term perspective", said the Foreign Minister of Belarus Vladimir Makey.[76] And Azerbaijan too in early 2017 resumed negotiations with the EU on a new partnership agreement.[77]

Kazakhstan was the first post-Soviet country to move in the direction of balancing its Eurasian commitments with strengthening the EU vector. Luc Devigne, Deputy Managing Director for Europe and Central Asia in the European External Action Service, mentioned that "the EU's relationship with Kazakhstan has never been any stronger or any better".[78] This success story is grounded in a carefully crafted policy of the government of Kazakhstan to create a positive image of this country in the West not only as a stable partner of European and Euro-Atlantic institutions, but also as a modernising economy open to foreign markets. The Kazakhstani government used a variety of tools to create a basis for its acceptance in Europe as a Central Asian leader and to lobby for boosting investments and technology transfer from the EU and particularly from Germany. The Eurasian Club in Berlin and Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs were instrumental in advertising and promoting Kazakhstan in the EU. Given Central Asia's interest in the EU, the examples of Kazakhstan and Armenia potentially might be replicated, for instance, by Kyrgyzstan which also looks for its own balancing mechanisms when it comes to relations with major foreign actors.

The 2017 Armenia-EU agreement on enhanced partnership (CEPA) was almost consensually characterised as a "win-win" compromise suitable to Yerevan, Moscow and Brussels. Russia's mainstream discourse looks quite constructive as well: it not only accepts the very idea of 'external diversification' preventing the reduction of foreign policies "to a diametric choice between Russia and the West, or a competition of value systems", but also praised Armenia for "becoming a space for dialogue between Russia and the EU" that rejects an "either/or"

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[75] Andrey Devyatkov, "Nash chelovek? Chego dobivaetsa Moskva ot moldavskogo prezidenta Dodona?", Moscow Carnegie Center, 1 June 2016.

[76] Quoted in: Vitaly Martunyuk, "Eastern Partnership summit: Compromise for the sake of continuation", *Ukrainian Prism*, Foreign Policy Council, 27 November 2017.

[77] "Azerbaijan, EU to discuss new partnership agreement", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 22 September 2017.

[78] Georgi Gotev, "Commission: Kazakhstan proves good relations with both EU and Russia are possible", *Euroactiv*, 6 October 2017.

approach to integration, and moves both Moscow and Brussels in a "both/and" direction.[79] Within this discourse Armenia can be portrayed as a country that "now achieved what Ukraine and Georgia could not: the benefits of both EEU and EU integration".[80]

In the Armenian discourse on the CEPA agreement, the key words are "geopolitical pragmatism", "manoeuvring" and "realism", although many voices in Armenia celebrated the agreement as a further drift away from Russia's patronage[81] and as an alternative – rather than a supplement – to the EAEU. CEPA – apart from its institutional effects – became a turning point for legitimising a Russia-sceptic discourse grounded in a number of arguments replicable beyond Armenia. Russia is treated as an internationally sanctioned country, which prevents it from investing in partners' economies and offering reduced gas prices, notwithstanding earlier promises. It is a mainstream point in Armenian discourse that the country primarily needs what Russia can't supply – modernisation, structural reforms and anti-corruption measures. Due to new customs duties, Armenia's trade with Georgia and Iran is tending to decrease, weakening trans-border cooperation. Armenian experts openly complain about the lack of any Russian assistance in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh; moreover, Russia is accused of selling arms to Azerbaijan, which, as seen from Armenia, leads to further militarisation of the region and contradicts Russia's role in the Minsk Group. Apart from that, Moscow is widely seen as an inefficient soft power, with a poor record of successful cultural and humanitarian projects.[82] As one can see, the list of claims toward Russia is quite long, and CEPA became an important point for articulating a strategic alternative to the status of Yerevan as Moscow's satellite, with possible spill-over effects in other Russia-dependent countries.

Option 4 would be the launch of a process of EU's recognition of the Eurasian Economic Union as a legitimate interlocutor (at least) and (perhaps in the long-run prospect) an economic partner. This scenario, as it is discussed nowadays, looks feasible under two conditions. The first one is de-politicization of the whole spectrum of European relations from both sides, which in particular implies the bracketing out of the Russia-Ukraine military conflict from the political agenda. Secondly, this option requires the recycling of the old doctrine of "engaging Russia" – in fact, a new edition of *Wandel durch Handel* that unfortunately didn't work earlier.

However, this option has many proponents in Europe. For example, the recent Friedrich Ebert Stiftung report claimed that the EU "perhaps had gone too far in its actions and failed to consult with Russia on an equal basis. Instead, the EU presented Russia with a fait accompli… (Therefore. – A.M.) the EU should involve Russia as a neighbour with its own interests in negotiations about a vision for this region's future… Russia's interests in the region are to be

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[79] Sergey Markedonov, "Armenia's 'Both/And' Police for Europe and Eurasia", Moscow Carnegie Center, 7 December 2017.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Garegin Khumarian, "Rossiya vzroslaya devochka, i dolzhna ponimat', chto muzhchiny ukhodyat ne 'k', a 'ot'", 30 November 2017.

[82] Politica cu Natalia Morari, *TV8*, 4 December 2017.

recognized and taken seriously".[83] This approach is similar to multiple voices coming from Moscow: "The Ukrainian crisis shows that there is an urgent need to identify viable and acceptable-to-all strategies for economic integration across the triangle EU-EaP-EAEU… The "Lisbon to Vladivostok" working group of the German business is regularly conducting meetings with the Chambers of Commerce of Poland and Ukraine to convince them to support deepened cooperation between the EU and the EAEU".[84] However, the advocacy for this policy of rapprochement is based on empirically questionable premises: "Recently, Russian leadership has been sending clear signals that it is committed to economic transformation and seeks to diversify and reform the rent-dependent and corruption-ridden economy… In the long run, economic liberalization and convergence (or at least closer cooperation) with the EU may also promote political liberalization".[85] Apparently, the demand for modernization and structural reforms is much more articulated in Armenia or Kazakhstan than in Russia. What is even more important is that option 4 is not easy to imagine, unless there were some de facto slide towards the 'Transnistrianisation' of the region of Donbas, signalled by a true cease fire, withdrawal of heavy weapons and safe opening for cross-border movement of people and trade.[86]

Arguably, the rationale for a potential policy change towards EAEU should be related not to "engaging Russia" (time and again), but in stimulating alternative visions of regionalism that hypothetically can counter-balance Russia's predominance and prevent the Russia-centric bias in this organization. In this respect Kazakhstan plays the pivotal role. In particular, "Kazakhstani Eurasianism does not view itself as a geopolitical space distinct from both Europe and Asia, but as embodying the positive meeting space between Europe and Asia, drawing on both".[87] In cultural sphere Kazakhstan has declared the transformation of its alphabet into Latin graphics, thus clearly distancing from the idea of Russian World to which the Kremlin strongly committed itself.

Against this backdrop, option 4 makes sense basically as a policy of establishing some kind of working relations with EAEU with a premium put on the role of Kazakhstan, as mainly Brussels' deal with Astana rather than with Moscow. The choice of Kazakhstan as EU's main Eurasian interlocutor might be duly appreciated by Astana and supported by analytical and expert resources of such organizations as Eurasian Club and Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs. In the meantime this type of policy would imply that the EU is more sympathetic with the Kazakhstani vision of Eurasianism rather than with its Russian (more imperialist) version, which appears to be only logical in the circumstances of Russia's detachment from most of the policy tracks earlier developed in conjunction with the EU. Unlike Russia, Kazakhstan never downgraded the

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[83] Miriam Eisleb, Alexandra Vasilieva and Simon Weiss, "The Incomplete Policy. There Ideas for the Future of Eastern Partnership", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Vienna, November 2017.

[84] Yurii Kofner, "Eastern Partnership and EAEU: from competition to cooperation", Greater Eurasia web portal, 24 November 2017.

[85] Alexandra Vasilieva, "Engage! Why the European Union Should Talk to the Eurasian Economic Union", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Vienna, September 2017.

[86] I am thankful to Michael Emerson for drawing my attention to this important point.

[87] Svante Cornell and Johan Engval, "Kazakhstan in Europe: Why Not?," Institute for Security and Development Policy website, 2 October 2017.

importance of modernization and economic openness[88] as structural conditions of its engagements with Europe, and pursued a security policy – with de-nuclearisation at its core[89] – its Western partners find responsible and contributing to peace and stability.

Option 5 seems to be the most complicated one. It implies that the EU and Russia would refuse to compete with each other over establishing control of specific territories, and try to find more innovative non-territorial (or trans-territorial) forms of responsible influence over their common neighbours. This scenario requires functional division of areas of interest and responsibility between the two dominant actors. More specifically, this option would necessitate decoupling security affairs (where Russia might play the first fiddle) from economic integration (where the EU might become the engine), and multilateral policies aimed at avoiding clashes between the two.

Of course, option 5 looks unrealistic without a mutual structural adjustment of EU's and Russia's policies in economic and security spheres. It also seems to be unfeasible in situations when Moscow wouldn't accept the EU as the most attractive economic and normative model for most of the common neighbours. In the meantime, the chances for this scenario would increase with the stronger commitment of Russia's neighbours to a neutral status, along the lines of Finnish, Swedish or Swiss non-bloc security policies, which would debunk Moscow's obsession with the alleged threats triggered by a hypothetical NATO enlargement.

Potentially – in a long run – this scenario might lead to more sophisticated networking relations of engagement and communication in the post-Soviet space. As Clifford Kupchan posits, "the time for formal association mechanisms that clearly define which countries are "in" or "out" of a given regional grouping has passed. Today, strategies such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that allow states to flexibly join parts of an initiative without necessarily committing to it irreversibly, foregoing competing offers, or integrating all aspects of their socio-political life have the upper hand".[90] Should this model be considered as beneficial for the EaP, it might open new chances for EU's other engagements in the East, including Central Asia and China.

Of course, some of these options may overlap and form more intricate policy combinations. The Kazakhstan–Armenia model might in due course boost chances for an EU-EAEU deal, which could bring Eurasia-loyalists more in line with EU economic rules and technical standards without politically antagonising Moscow. Moreover, at certain point there might be chances to balance the EU-centrism of a (still potential) wider European economic area by the important roles that Turkey and the post-*Brexit* UK can play in its reification, which might correspond to Russia's vision of a multipolar Europe without damaging EU's positions.

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[88] Danila Bochkarev, "Modernisation is a genuine goal for Kazakhstan", *Euractiv*, 21 August 2017.

[89] Erlan Idrissov, "Kazakhstan shows denuclearization work", *Global Times*, 8 October 2016.

[90] Clifford Kupchan, "EU's neighborhood policies: Revamping Fundamentals", Valdai Club web portal, 29 November 2017.

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