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## 10 Russia as a counter-normative soft power

### Between ideology and policy

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The concept of soft power is usually referred to as one of the most important components of states' policies towards each other, grounded in the force of attraction as opposed to coercion and projection of either military or economic strength. The high popularity of this concept in academic and political discourses can be explained by its ability to conceptualize power through norms and identities, and relate them to non-coercive policy tools.

A product of American political thought after the end of the Cold War, soft power then expanded to describe the non-military policies of other countries and became not only an analytical concept, but also part of the self-descriptive language used by policymakers themselves. The concept worked rather well under two primary conditions: when applied to Western countries, and when describing the power projections of actors motivated by a relatively coherent and consistent set of norms, either promoted as allegedly universal or perceived as having a superior value over other norms. Therefore, soft power is by and large a useful concept in the case of more or less fixed and relatively well-established identities and their concomitant narratives.

Yet it is exactly at this point that the research puzzle starts: what happens to the idea of soft power when it is put into practice by non-Western countries, and when it comes to situations of competing identities and unstable narratives? In these cases, soft power needs problematization and fine-tuning, which is the main purpose of this chapter. Its focus is on the intricacies of Russia's soft power projections in the South Caucasus, with particular attention paid to the role of the religious dimensions of this complex process.

We base our analysis on various sociolinguistic and cultural semiotic approaches, a combination that opens interesting research perspectives when it comes to concepts as complex and rich in meaning as soft power. First, focusing on the semiotic structure of soft power discourses reveals that

[W]ords alone often cannot carry the power that they often have—the force of affect is needed to explain how words resonate with audiences and have political effects beyond their mere verbal utterance (...) There is no “natural” link between words and the objects, identities and so on that

they purport to express (...) The attachment of signifiers to signified (...) is dependent upon an affective push prompting the construction of this linkage. (Solomon 2014, p. 729–730)

This approach is of particular importance for soft power studies since attraction is a largely performative and situational concept, especially when it comes to its religious dimensions.

Second, the discipline of cultural semiotics offers a good lens for exploring the process of re-signification, or redeployment of terms in previously unexplored or even “unauthorized” contexts. Re-signification is mostly used by agents located at the margins of political structures who wish to change previous meanings by either expanding the scope of concepts or by folding other meanings into them (Schippers 2009). Re-signification is closely related to language games. Following the logic of Wittgenstein, language has neither ontological stability nor unity; consequently, there is no authoritative, determinate collective “we” that would appeal to a mental or metaphysical source of identity or authority, or unveil ‘literal, uninterpreted truth’ (Robinson 2009, p. 12–13). The language games approach claims that each concept decomposes under closer scrutiny into a series of ‘pictures’ of reality with their own ‘playful and fluid’ (Robinson 2009, p. 12–13) contexts. In this chapter, we develop this argument and project it onto Russia’s soft power in the South Caucasus.

Third, the combination of sociolinguistic and cultural semiotic perspectives makes it clear that soft power is not necessarily conducive to ‘empowerment through the process of co-optation’ (Gallarotti 2011, p. 29); as a ‘representational force’, it can be used to ‘limit the options of the subjects at whom it is directed (...) It aims to close off its victims’ options by promising them unthinkable harm unless they comply in word and in deed with the force-wielder’s demands’ (Mattern 2005, p. 602). This thesis can be applied to Russian soft power in the South Caucasus, which makes it quite distinct from the EU’s operationalization of the concept.

This chapter is structured as follows. We start with an academic unpacking of the concept of soft power, emphasizing some methodological issues important for approaching it as a research category. Then we discuss the Russian way of tackling soft power as a policy tool, underlining its specificity in comparison to the EU. In this context, the role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) deserves particular attention. Finally, we project the concept of soft power onto Moscow’s policies in the South Caucasus in general, and Georgia in particular, again explicating the ROC’s policy niche. This chapter is based on 30 in-depth interviews with local practitioners—Georgian priests, politicians, experts and officials—conducted in Tbilisi in August 2015 and August–September 2016.

### Soft power: an academic screening of the concept

Academically, the concept of soft power can be discussed from different angles. For one, it can be approached from both epistemological and ontological perspectives. On the one hand, the very idea of soft power was initially

conceived as a cognitive tool of analysis and therefore was an element of a variety of academic discourses. Soft power does not engender a theory of its own: it can be conceptualized from competing research perspectives. Realists would claim that developing a soft power strategy could be helpful to “soften” the harder approaches to indispensable military, financial and economic relations. This reasoning might be well in line with the model of ‘the prudent, benevolent hegemon that understands the limits of coercive power and so promotes legitimacy and emulation of its values while tolerating pluralism and diversity’ (Schweller and Priess 1997, p. 3). Constructivists (Hopf 2013, p. 343) would emphasize the socially determined components of soft power as a cultural and ideational phenomenon, grounded in the operationalization of attractive ideas for engaging with other members of the international society and influencing their policies. For social constructivists, this type of power would be an expression of the acceptance of ideas supported by material resources and institutions.

On the other hand, ontologically, soft power ultimately became the name for a policy tool and thus an allegedly indispensable element of the policy-making techniques that governments design and apply. These techniques are very broad—from using national literary tradition as a crucial element of cultural policy (e.g. Bulgakov diplomacy, see Schillinger 2015) to the practice of hiring an army of paid commentators (known as “bots”) on social networks (Klishin 2015).

In addition, soft power can be deployed in debates between universalism and particularism. In the course of its functioning, soft power—like many other political concepts—has acquired the character of a universal policy tool detached from the specific conditions of its emergence and development. Indeed, ‘soft power is a product of a particular moment’ (Hayden 2012, p. 30). As the Russian analyst Fiodor Lukyanov (2015) mentioned, soft power as a term was coined at the end of the Cold War when the winning side—the West—was looking for plausible explanations for its victory that could extend beyond those particular historical circumstances, as well as beyond materialist explanations. Yet, there is debate as to whether this concept, having originated in specific conditions, can be easily transferable to other situations with different constellations of actors and motivations. There are voices—in particular, in the Valdai Club—predicting that globally, soft power as a concept is in crisis and is facing the prospect of decline (Tsygankov 2016).

Since soft power is neither trans-historical nor universal, but rather a context-specific concept, it might take different forms in the course of its functioning and evolution, and its content might also alter over time, depending on the structures of hegemonic discourse it is embedded in. The binary soft-hard power distinction primarily reflected the dominant Western attitudes in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, when other dichotomies were in wide use as well (hard versus soft security, democracy versus autocracy, freedom versus non-freedom and so forth). Yet these binaries lost their cognitive potential and political appeal as the structure of international relations shifted.

and partitions. In postmodern discourse, binaries are viewed as irrelevant and lacking in explanatory force. That is why they might be substituted by a group of more synthetic terms such as smart power, hybrid power and so forth.

This has practical repercussions for the South Caucasus: it is typical for Georgian experts to claim that Russia's soft power is wrapped in—and thus is indistinguishable from—hard security tools (Kapanadze 2015, p. 180). There is a strong perception among policy experts in the Eastern Partnership countries that Russia is interested in soft power tools as a prelude to territorial expansion (Grigas 2016). Russia's understanding of soft power might even call into question the appropriateness of applying this concept to Russian regional policies in the common neighbourhood. As a close watcher of Russia's policy towards Georgia observed: 'It is probably time to consider another term, because this power is not really soft and it's not really used in the spirit of the Joseph Nye's definition' (Civil Georgia 2015). Therefore, the conceptual lucidity of the term and its interlacing with opposing concepts is a matter of debate. It can't be ruled out that with sceptical attitudes towards soft power on the rise both in Russia and among its neighbours, the whole concept will be superseded by other terms that might more adequately reflect the increasingly complex and hybrid fabric of Russian forces of attraction in the world.

Finally, the concept of soft power can be tackled from structural and agential perspectives, which will be discussed in detail in the rest of this section. From the perspective of individual agents' policies, soft power is often reduced to branding nations as places with attractive tourist destinations (resort areas, hospitality), world famous cuisine, etc. The image-making ingredients of soft power often serve basically for decorative and demonstrative purposes, aiming at furnishing nation brands with appealing elements, but not necessarily as starting points for communication, socialization and agenda setting.

This is why a structural approach to soft power seems more pertinent: it elucidates soft power's ability to set an attractive agenda that other members of the international society would voluntarily follow, based on such universalizable notions as good and evil or truth and falsehood that can't be constrained geographically and kept within national borders. In this light, soft power is an intersubjective concept denoting the ability to cause spillover effects by changing the policies of other international actors without using coercive means. Soft power can therefore be seen not merely as a tool manipulated by states, but as a complex system of hegemonic relations with a plethora of international partners and interlocutors. Thus, soft power is a structural type of power relations, necessitating not a unilateral power projection, but investments in reshuffling the communicative environment to facilitate the achievement of policy goals, both ideological and practical.

From a structural vantage point, an ideal model for soft power encompasses a number of components. First, it is a discourse-based sociolinguistic construct (Mattern 2005) aimed at normative and analytical framing, conducive to "discourse control" and domination (Rothman 2011). In this context, the role of different public discourses and their producers is central. Along the

lines of Michel Foucault's theorizing, one may claim that the conditions for the emergence of different elements of "discursive power" or "language power" (Antoniades 2003, p. 31), as well as 'heterogeneous discursive zones' and their genealogies, are important elements of soft power research (Widder 2004, p. 416). This is consistent with the constructivist premise of a social construction of reality (Lupovici 2009), with epistemic communities as its key stakeholders. From a Foucauldian perspective, the 'regimes of power/knowledge' are always contextual and situational, and can inform different 'styles of political thinking' (Merlingen 2006, p. 183). Soft power is one of these styles, grounded in promoting images and messages of attraction through a plethora of communicative mechanisms (Flynn 2004).

The second structural element of soft power is its grounding in norms and values. Soft power not only embeds technical tools for either influencing or manipulating policymaking machinery and public opinion in targeted countries, but also contains a strong normative potential often sustained by an identification with certain political values. Therefore, soft power connotes a consensual order based on shared values, expectations, perceptions and understandings, and presupposes a value-laden identity capable of setting the standards of social and political behaviour, mostly based on externalizing successful domestic experiences and projecting them beyond national borders. It is on this basis that soft power techniques incorporate the potential to create positive incentives.

A third structural ingredient of soft power is communication and information management, performed by the state in conjunction with other actors as a crucial element of power projection. A country might possess huge cultural potential for attraction, yet it can be considered a source of soft power only if others accept it in this capacity (Larsen 2014, p. 7). Attraction is not natural, but always constructed and communicated (Mattern 2005, p. 597).

Still, agential level should not be ignored, since soft power is an intrinsically diverse concept that comes in different modalities, three of which seem to be of the utmost importance. The first encompasses cases in which the application of soft power is a matter of principle. The EU is the most illustrative example of this category, projecting its value-based normative power onto neighbouring countries. The essence of EU soft power is in projecting the normative experiences of regional integration within Europe to its periphery. In fact, through a mosaic of dialogues and multilateral cooperation mechanisms, the EU can promote shared governance structures consisting of concentric circles—from those neighbours which accept the *acquis communautaire* to those partners with whom legal harmonization and convergence have to be negotiated. In doing so, Brussels wishes to transform its partners through the force of attraction (Stavrakakis 2005). According to Ringmar, 'the EU has next to no "power over" anything at all—not even, in fact, proper power over its own constituent units—yet it evidently has a considerable amount of "power to"' (2007, p. 202). In this sense, the EU is sympathetic to the concept of soft power as 'the ability to shape the future' (Gaventa 2007, p. 214).

The second type applies to relatively small countries devoid of strong military resources, for whom soft power is a matter of necessity. Due to the American roots of the concept, soft power is often referred to as an attribute of major powers, yet smaller powers might have their own ways and means (though rather modest in practical terms) to practice soft power. For example, Georgia can be an object of Russia's and the EU's soft power projects, yet in the meantime can generate and develop its own soft power resources aimed at rebuilding communication with the two breakaway territories, improving its reputation in the West and positioning itself as a good neighbour to Russia, including as a competitive tourist destination.

At a third agential level, soft power can be considered a matter of choice, since it has an alternative (hard power). This is the case for all strong military actors, including Russia. Soft and hard power can often be complementary rather than antithetical instruments, and soft power resources can be converted into hard power gains, which Russia demonstrated by annexing Crimea in the immediate aftermath of the Sochi Olympics, an event that was designed—and widely perceived—as the heyday of Russia's soft power exposure. It is from here that we start discussing the specific characteristics of soft power in Russia.

### Soft power à la russe

The main hurdle of applying the concept of soft power to Russian foreign policy is its dual nature: it is both vilified as a Western tool aimed at undermining Russia and its neighbours from the inside (Monaghan 2016, p. 2), and admired as an effective instrument that allows goals to be attained without the risks of applying force. Some experts claim that soft power as a concept is alien to Russian foreign policy philosophy (Bai 2015), but Russia nevertheless develops its own soft power instruments. This duality, which is deeply embedded in the dominant interpretations of soft power among the Russian elite, has parallel effects: on the one hand, it makes it impossible to reject the concept as allegedly alien and intentionally subversive, if not dangerous, and on the other hand, it weakens the contestation of the concept that Russia itself is eager to put into practice. Therefore, through the idea of soft power, Russia both detaches itself from the West and associates with it, as part of a wider situation of indecision over the impossibility of both integrating Russia with the West and repudiating it.

As one of the countries for whom soft power is a matter of choice, Russia shares a lot with the US but radically differs from most of its post-Soviet neighbours and the EU. American authorship of the soft power concept is largely interpreted in Russia as an indication of the auxiliary status of soft power in great powers' diplomatic arsenals, and as an addition to otherwise force-based foreign policy that many in the Kremlin are definitely eager to imitate. The US serves as an important reference point in Russian soft power debates due to the perpetually available option of switching to a

“real”, hard-power-based policy, which Russia has done in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria.

However, Russia's interpretation of the US legacy of the concept is highly selective. Moscow appreciates the alleged freedom that the concept allows for using coercion, but completely discards important—and often overlooked—points of consonance between soft power and the democratic peace theory. The latter is grounded in the assumption that in a community of democratic nations, the use of hard power is impractical and should be avoided by all means, and the promotion of democratic forms of governance can be an efficient strategy. Influencing the behaviour of foreign powers can, in most cases, be obtained through “soft” methods, by coordinating and setting up common discourses on norms, principles and rules.

Yet Russia, duly (but tacitly) comprehending its mismatch with Western standards and norms, not only refuses to relate effective soft power with ideas of democracy, human rights, accountability and the rule of law, but intentionally reduces the whole concept to its technical elements. From the viewpoint of many soft power practitioners in Russia, their mission is basically to establish information channels with societies in foreign countries for simply delivering Russia's official position and, if possible, for engaging foreign opinion makers in some kind of communication (Burlinova 2015a). In other words, the dominant understanding of soft power in Russia radically simplifies the concept to the point of merely clarifying the policies of the Russian government and interacting with friendly social and political groups of “Russia-understanders”, but not with those a priori—and in a very primordialist manner—considered Russia's enemies (Fenenko 2016). Russia thus appears to adhere to a rather narrow definition of soft power as an information strategy aimed at supplying viewpoints that differ from the dominant Western discourses, without an overarching aim of developing policy content that might radically change Russia's image abroad (Burlinova 2015a). In this narrow interpretation, soft power is an instrument to persuade the undecided, rather than a tool to deal with rivals, competitors and adversaries (Fenenko 2016). Neither Russia's fine-tuning to meet the expectations of its neighbours nor changing of its pre-existing political agendas is included in this parochial vision. This exclusion attests to the semiotically self-referential and auto-communicative nature of Russia's soft power: ‘Russians try to assure themselves that their country is great’ (from an interview with a Georgian expert, representative of a US foundation in Tbilisi, July 2015).

In the search for its own, country-specific version of soft power, a Russian expert speaks about a ‘model of thousand threads’ as a conservative alternative to ‘the policy of supporting the opposition. It can be almost completely depoliticized, with progress channelled into sociocultural, economic and scientific spheres’ (Sutyurin 2016). Therefore, Russia's operationalization of soft power is a typical example of the appropriation of a Western concept and the attribution of different meanings to it through the process of discursive re-signification. What Russia calls soft power is far removed from the original

meaning of the idea as deeply embedded in liberal thinking. Russia's soft power is an instrument to stimulate the diffusion of illiberal practices and institutions that are ultimately in contradiction with the core liberal ideas of personal freedom of choice and plurality of opinions.

The conceptual ambiguity of soft power in Russia is accompanied by fragmentation within the Russian political class. Soft power is not a concept strategically accepted by all bodies within the Russian government. It is mainly promoted by an agency named *Rossotrudnichestvo*<sup>1</sup>, shared by a certain part of the expert community aware of the debates on soft power in the West and welcomed by institutions that functionally can take advantage of the concept (such as universities and policy think tanks). Other branches of the government might be either insensitive to the soft power agenda, or inimical to having it as an important reference point for Russian diplomacy. Natalia Burlinova, who chairs the "Creative Diplomacy" group, acknowledges that 'Russian bureaucrats are very sceptical to soft power instrument, they don't understand what this is all about' (Khromakov 2016). Soft power played no role in launching a campaign to expel Turkish students from Russian universities in the aftermath of the crisis in bilateral relations (which erupted after the incident involving a Russian military jet shot down by the Turkish military in fall 2015). Furthermore, the annexation of Crimea can hardly be attractive to most of Russia's partners in Eurasian integration; it has only increased their sense of vulnerability vis-à-vis potential Russian incursions.

It is against this background that we can discuss the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in soft power promotion. In the literature, there is a tendency to treat the external activity of the ROC as an intrinsic element of Russian soft power machinery. The ROC indeed positions itself as 'an imperial Church' (Chapnin 2015). The Russian imperial body is reconstituted by various border-transcending practices, which in some cases can be conducive to classical land grabs, but also stretch far beyond them to include religious diplomacy.

The reality on the ground, however, is more complex. Analysis of specific soft power projects (implemented under the aegis of *Rossotrudnichestvo*, the Gorchakov Fund, the "Creative Diplomacy" group, etc.) attests to a rather limited space for interaction between the state and state-patronized organizations, on the one hand, and the ROC on the other. The ROC itself does not include soft power in its lexicon, preferring to speak about missionary activity in countries with a strong Orthodox presence. This makes the ROC's role in sustaining Russia's soft power diplomacy rather limited in scope, as well as in terms of procedural policies.

### **Russia in the South Caucasus: soft power projections**

In this section, we switch to regional projections of Russian soft power in the South Caucasus. We start with Russia's soft power potential in a field of normative competition with the EU, and then identify the role of the ROC in the system of Russian soft power.

### *The Russia–EU frame*

Russia's soft power in the South Caucasus can be approached from the perspective of its competitive interaction with EU normative power, which creates an inherent ambiguity. Even those soft power promoters such as Natalia Burlinova, who explicitly position themselves within the Eurasian paradigm and call for 'an absolutely autonomous integration project' under Russia's auspices, favour borrowing the EU's experiences of public diplomacy and external communication on a technological level (Burlinova 2015b).

However, distinctions between Russia and the EU are crucial. First, EU policies can be characterized by a combination of normative ends (democracy/peace promotion) and normative means (non-coercive diplomacy). In Russia's case, one might see much less articulated and more diverse normative ends (from Eurasianist ideology to protection of Russian speakers), with a strong reliance on non-normative means (military force and economic pressure). This dissimilarity is substantial, since Russia might use hard power arguments as a means to counter EU soft/normative power. This is the case in Russia's policy towards Georgia (for example, in delineating a border between Georgia and Russian-patronized South Ossetia) and Armenia (in the sense of making Armenia's integration with the Eurasian Economic Union a de facto precondition for protecting them from possible conflicts with Azerbaijan).

Secondly, the EU is a new and experimental type of institutional actor with no legacy of the past, while Russia does have this legacy (traditions of Soviet mentality, inertia, etc.). This explains Russia's heavy reliance on memory politics as an ideational tool aimed at promoting an explicitly conservative agenda in its areas of interest, including the South Caucasus.

Thirdly, in the South Caucasus, as elsewhere in the common neighbourhood, the EU is motivated by the promotion of its norms. In the meantime, the driving motive behind Russia's soft power is the widely spread conviction that Russia is not appreciated enough, which leads to a reactive and self-victimizing policy. Konstantin Kosachev, the former head of *Rossotrudnichestvo*, on numerous occasions claimed that Russia's "real" achievements are greater than what its image, which is being intentionally blackened, would suggest. In the South Caucasus, this attitude leads to more emphasis on a realist discourse focused on Russia's resources in security and economics, rather than on adhering to a certain type of normative conduct.

Fourth, the EU uses its soft power to expand the scope of choices and alternatives for the countries of the common neighbourhood, and acts in accordance with the concept of governmentality, conceived by Michel Foucault as a power technique conducive to expanding the space for freedom of choice to its objects. Conversely, Russia's soft power is meant to reduce and limit the scope of free choice for its neighbouring countries, and punish those who would prefer to associate with the EU or NATO.

Fifth, the EU adheres to laic/secular liberal norms at the core of its soft power, while Russia uses religious channels and theological connotations

in its diplomacy. Georgia is a good illustration of this instrumentalization of the Orthodox faith as an additional tool for keeping neighbours under Russia's sway.

### *Challenging the West*

Under the third presidential term of Vladimir Putin, Russia reassessed previous attempts to socialize itself into the European normative order as having failed. Thus, Moscow ultimately opted for a strategy of contesting these norms, which inevitably implied constructing new normative borders with Europe. Being explicitly illiberal, Russian soft power aims to reach audiences in neighbouring countries that share anti-EU, anti-multicultural, anti-tolerance and anti-globalist policy tenets. Paradoxically,

[I]t is actually Russia's reaction, rather than democracy promotion per se, that most strongly influences domestic developments in these countries (...) Russia tends not to explicitly counteract Western efforts at democracy promotion per se but, rather, at first, promotes and supports pro-Russian actors whenever possible inside the countries, and, failing that, moves to undermine the capacity of the "target countries" to pursue integration with the West. (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015, p. 469)

It is through this counter-normativity as a set of ethical and moral demands (Brassett and Higgott 2003) that the foundations for the dominant conceptualization of soft power during Putin's third presidential term have been laid. Russia uses soft power not for the sake of fostering Europeanization and comprehensive modernization, but rather for voluntarily detaching itself from the group of democratic nations sharing common normative approaches to world politics. This strategy is not aimed at engineering new communicative spaces for shared norms, ideas and values, but rather at imposing Russian worldviews on Russia's neighbours. In this respect, soft power might correlate with the Russian neo-imperial project. As its pivotal element, Russia portrays itself as a global harbinger of the return to the era of sovereign nation states, with normative issues playing a key role in substantiating Russian ambitions.

Russia sees an opening in the South Caucasus in light of the EU's Eastern Partnership fatigue and uncertainty with regard to the region, and in the dissatisfaction of the South Caucasus with the EU's policies (Mchedlishvili 2016). Thus, President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev claimed: 'Some deem that we should integrate into Europe. We shouldn't integrate anywhere (...) Moreover in today's situation of discrimination and Islamophobia (...) Can we be accepted? No. This is a bitter truth' (Rafigoglu 2015). Economic arguments are an important part of this discursive strategy—as a Russian expert suggests,

[I]t becomes obvious that neither the US nor the EU can become drivers for Azerbaijan's economic growth, while the access to a newly integrated

the strengthening of Russia's positions in the Middle East and the slow but steady economic growth in Russia, economic rapprochement between Baku and Moscow might be pretty rational. (Sputnik 2015)

A similar attitude could be applicable to the entire region:

[T]he West's involvement in the area has been diminishing, as evidenced by the fact that countries like Georgia have been denied prospects of membership in the Euro-Atlantic structures and the significance of the Eastern Partnership has been waning. Russia's actions have also been a factor, albeit of a secondary and lesser importance. (Falkowski 2016)

Another Russian expert presumes that 'Georgian experts are wary of economic dominance of Turkey and Azerbaijan in their country. Many Georgian specialists indirectly lean towards creation of a counter-weight to this impact, having in mind Russia' (Markedonov 2015).

Russia's strategy of contesting the West contains a strong religious component. In the view of Patriarch Kirill, Russia's identity remains deeply Christian, while Europe has denied the concept of the Christian world and replaced it with the idea of European civilization. Therefore, on behalf of the ROC he proposed to adhere to the 'Christian choice' instead of the 'European choice', while claiming that there is a 'Russian understanding of Christianity' as a national ideal, presumably distinct from a more universal conception of faith (Inozemtsev 2015). Mitropolit Illarion, a former ROC representative to European organizations, predicts the collapse of European civilization unless it restores its true Christian traditions and roots (Illarion 2016).

This discourse might find fertile ground in a country like Georgia that 'is still struggling to come to terms with its past—even as it seeks closer ties with the west' (North 2015). For Moscow, accentuating cultural and religious affinity with Georgia is a political instrument that allows for emphasizing the incompatibility of traditional Orthodox values with the liberal emancipatory agenda of the EU, which allegedly 'calls for respecting sin' and 'forgets about nations and patriotism' (Devdariani 2014). Standing as testimony to this mindset is the parliamentary debate in Georgia on a blasphemy bill that was introduced in 2016 to make religious irreverence punishable by law, prompting concerns about freedom of expression in the devoutly Orthodox Christian society (Lomsadze 2016). The Georgian parliament has also introduced a ban on same-sex marriage (Nikuradze 2016). An interesting consonance of the two societies is the appearance of 'Orthodox Stalinists' in both countries (Desnitskiy 2016)—a paradoxical mix of religious and communist allegiances inimical to democracy.

### **Soft power and its contestation: a Georgian outlook**

Shared Orthodox Christian principles represent a key element of Russian soft power in Georgia. They are promoted by the Georgian Orthodox Church

This conservative rejection of Western values unites the Russian government and the ROC, and it resonates with the patriarchal and traditionalist attitudes prevalent in Georgian society. The GOC actively impedes the expansion of Western liberal values that aim to increase acceptance of sexual and religious minorities. As a result, the consolidation of Orthodox discourses inherently strengthens Russian influence in Georgia. This was demonstrated by the general elections held on 8 October 2016, which, for the first time in Georgia's post-Soviet history, heralded the entry into the legislature of a political party (the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia) with an explicitly anti-NATO platform.

While the GOC does not officially oppose the Georgian government's policies aimed at greater integration with the EU, it asserts that the West must accept Georgia as it is, along with its traditional mentality. Georgian Patriarch Ilia II has made a number of public statements denouncing what he perceives to be various Western threats to the Georgian people, their religious beliefs and cultural practices. These range from the promotion of LGBT lifestyles to the supposedly destructive influence of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter on children. The GOC has exhibited an unfriendly attitude towards the establishment of European norms on human rights and religious freedom on a number of occasions. For instance, in the early 2000s the GOC turned a blind eye to the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses by Vasil Mkalavishvili, an Orthodox priest who was eventually defrocked. Similarly, the GOC's reaction to anti-Muslim incidents in the villages of Nigvziani and Tsintskaro in late 2012 was largely muted. In addition, at the beginning of Mikheil Saakashvili's presidency the GOC took anti-Turkish positions and even argued that if Russia was considered an occupant, then Turkey might be viewed as an aggressor as well (Interview with the Ombudsman on Affairs of Religious Minorities, Tbilisi, 2015).

Nevertheless, Russia's counter-normative strategy of contesting Europe faces resistance in the South Caucasus. The Georgian case allows for the identification of major perceptual gaps between the two parties. The major source of disagreement is that for Russia soft power boils down to techniques of communication, while for Georgia it makes sense only as a substantive concept. In other words, Russia deems that attractiveness can be produced through information management, while Georgia expects Russia to become a more democratic and less aggressive country (NewsGeorgiaTV 2012); otherwise it will be perceived by many in Georgia as a part of the problem, not a part of the solution. As a Georgian member of parliament says,

[W]e have adopted Christianity earlier than Russia, and this is an important part of our culture that definitely helps us in dialogue with co-believers, including Russians (...) Yet today we observe strange things [in Russia]. Orthodox ideology became a substitution to the Communist doctrine, with ideas beneficial to the Kremlin being widely circulated. We don't have this [in Georgia]. We have state policy and private beliefs. (Snob 2015)

Georgia, a country trying to strike a delicate balance between Europeanization and its Orthodox traditions, can hardly sustain the ROC's ambitions to put Russia at the centre of global transformations or downgrade the human rights dimension of these transformative processes (Solodovnik 2016). The ROC's sympathies to the Soviet past (Kovpak 2016) are also very unlikely to be welcomed in any post-Soviet countries building their own nation states. The nostalgia for the Soviet past in Georgia, whether in the form of Stalin souvenirs or Soviet-themed restaurants, is more for commercial purposes in the context of a rapidly growing tourist industry than it is actually resonating with the public at large (MIR24 2016).

The Georgian clerical establishment is heterogeneous; it includes a group of priests who hold liberal views, respect human rights and personal liberties and tend to be sceptical towards Russia. As one such priest related, the 'ROC can't be a communication channel between our countries. The Church can't effectively manage political issues. We see what Russia does. ROC is not autonomous and it is not a force of good' (Interview with Father Guram, Tbilisi, 2015). For members of this group, 'Russia is a matter of secondary importance. The West represents more topical issues' (Interview with the Ombudsman on Affairs of Religious Minorities, Tbilisi, 2015).

Even though the GOC and ROC share most rituals of worship and church services, in congregations across Georgia, Russia is largely perceived as an external aggressor. Some pro-Western priests are of the opinion—one that is also widespread in the Georgian expert community—that those who promote Russia as an alternative to the West probably work for the Russian government. As one priest noted, '(...) they [pro-Russian forces] are from the Georgian clergy and even though they cannot be officially "recruited" by the Russian FSB, they have affinity towards Russia, which means that they work for it unintentionally' (Interview with Father Alexander, Tbilisi, 2015). Therefore, there is an opinion in the Georgian expert community that the common Soviet background of both the ROC and the GOC lays the groundwork for close interaction between the Georgian and Russian Patriarchs and President Putin.

Many Georgian supporters of rapprochement with Russia simultaneously adhere to tough nationalist positions towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Markedonov 2015). The ROC's positions are also challenged by Abkhazia's religious circles. Dorofei, the head of the self-proclaimed Abkhaz Church, claims that instead of focusing on canonical services, the Moscow Patriarchate is more bent on fighting Western conspiracies. In his words,

Russian Orthodoxy, unfortunately, is coming back to its pre-revolutionary way of life that led to revolution and the destruction of the church itself. I am sad about a medieval understanding of the church mission, with priests thinking of themselves as grandees and the ensuing enrichment (...) This explains alienation from the church that has lost reputation among certain groups within Russia. (Koshik 2014)

The schism within the Abkhaz Orthodox Church—between loyalties to the Moscow Patriarchate, the Constantinople Patriarchate and the independents—constitutes a major challenge to Russian soft power in the South Caucasus. In spite of former Abkhaz President Ankvab's direct appeal to Patriarch Kirill, the Patriarch still refuses to recognize the Abkhaz Orthodox Church and take it under his canonical jurisdiction (Kuchuberiya 2013). This position not only creates a feeling of uncertainty between the ROC and the Kremlin's policy of integrating Abkhazia with Russia, but is also lambasted in Abkhazia as undermining its claims for independence from Georgia.

In Abkhazia, clergy of Georgian origin continue to hope for the unity of all canonical territories under the Georgian Orthodox Church (Hieromonk Dorofey 2006). It is not surprising that the Abkhazian clergy's plans to create their own church with assistance from the Moscow Patriarchate were bolstered after the war of 2008. However, the ROC took a pragmatic stance, not recognizing the independence of the Abkhaz Orthodox Church (Diocese). Russian Patriarch Kirill stressed that both Abkhazia and South Ossetia continue to fall under the canonical jurisdiction of the Georgian Orthodox Church. The ROC did not challenge the results of the August 2008 war but followed the principle of respecting canonical territories (Venediktova 2013). As a result, the Tbilisi Patriarchate refused to recognize the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which proclaimed its independence from Moscow.

This is how a representative of the Georgian government described the ROC's role in Georgia's breakaway regions:

ROC, in fact, plays a double game in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Although officially it does not extend canonical jurisdiction over these territories, in practice ROC administers the Abkhaz Diocese. Georgian churches are remodelled in Russian style. For instance, we know that construction of a Russian church commenced in Tskhinvali a few months ago. A Russian bishop from Vladikavkaz regularly attends military parades in Tskhinvali. This is a policy of eliminating any trace of Georgian Orthodox Church. Georgian priests are ousted, which makes the conduct of church services in Georgian impossible. This is an unfriendly policy. (Interview with a representative of the Agency on Religious Affairs of Georgia, Tbilisi, 2015)

According to a Georgian official,

[Patriarch] Ilia knows that the Kremlin holds the keys. What raises concerns are Russia's imperial aspirations, its occupation of the Georgian lands (...) Since we still have these unsolved questions and the ROC does not violate the canonical rights [of the GOC] with regard to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, we have to talk to Russia (...) Yet this is a trap, and GOC steps into it (...) Actually I think that Moscow is ready to return our

territories, but the price will be too high. It means no Euro-integration. In fact, it means to capture Georgia. (Interview with Ombudsman on Affairs of Religious Minorities, Tbilisi, 2015)

Politically, the ROC's stance yielded mixed results: the head of the GOC held firm in his insistence that Georgia would ultimately retrieve its lost territories (Rosbalt 2013). In the meantime, he mentioned that Patriarch Kirill of Moscow does everything possible to help restore the unity of Georgia (Georgia Online 2013). Of course, reactions to this statement in Abkhazia were predictably negative (Damenia 2013), which illustrates the potential controversies and political repercussions of the religious aspects of soft power.

### Conclusion

The ideational structure of Russian soft power in the South Caucasus is based on moral arguments constitutive of Russia's conservative agenda, and includes substantial religious components when it comes to launching Russia's counter-normative project. Many of Russia's neighbours would confirm that cultural (soft-power-based) and geopolitical instruments reinforce each other (Bonicelli 2014) as elements of Russia's foreign policy. Yet these instruments resonate differently in different countries. Armenia is the most responsive to the appeal for Eurasian integration as a shield against possible security troubles over Nagorno-Karabakh. Georgia is largely disinterested in Russia's Eurasian offer, yet is very susceptible to religious arguments built on a common Orthodox platform. Azerbaijan might share much of Russia's scepticism of European liberalism, yet remains as loath to join the Eurasian Economic Union as Georgia is.

The case of Russia raises a number of new questions pertinent to soft power. One of them relates to the inversion of the concept of attraction, from its taken-for-granted liberal version to something constrastingly constructed as a mix of conservative norms, propaganda and disinformation accompanied by the enactment of military force. Initially, soft power was used in the cultural context of Western standards and norms, which gained predominance long before the end of the Cold War and the implosion of the Communist world system. Nowadays, in Russia's case, soft power is a more vague concept whose academic and political validity is contested by many authors. However, what is absolutely clear is that soft power has to be understood as a set of policy technologies that involve think tanks and policy foundations, mass media, education and cultural diplomacy, and are meant to create parallel spaces of information management and political mobilization. These technologies work differently, depending on each country's context.

We have also found that Russia's soft power exists as an object of discourse, yet doesn't always translate into recurrent and self-sustaining policy practices. Thus, it drastically differs from the EU's soft power apparatus with its...



and institutional backing and the distribution of roles between state and non-state actors. In many respects, Russian soft power functions differently—it is exercised as power at a distance that does not always take institutional form, and relies on mostly informal communicative structures.

As we have seen in the case of Georgia, the integration of religious components into the Russian model of soft power complicated its structure and content, and in the meantime expanded the space for contestation and resistance. Georgia's example demonstrates that Russia projects soft power through interaction between the ROC and GOC. In other words, Orthodox faith is one of the integral elements of Russian soft power in Georgia. At the same time, soft power is not simply projected by Russia; it is actually co-produced and reproduced by local actors (experts, journalists and policymakers), who attach their own meaning to it and in the process adjust it to Georgian realities, which often creates counter-discourses of anti-imperial resistance and contestation.

## Note

- 1 Rossotrudnichestvo became an object of harsh criticism for its failure to practically assist Russian compatriots living abroad, and even in mismanaging state funds; see Regnum 2015.

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## Part V

# Prospects