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Soft, Normative or Transformative Power: What Do the EU's Communications with Eastern Partners Reveal About its Influence?

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Abstract

In 2014-2015, the European Union revised its neighbourhood policy (ENP), aiming to introduce more differentiation and a more pragmatic approach to the varying levels of ambition for cooperation or integration of neighbouring countries. The Eastern Partnership, a policy explicitly targeting the EU's eastern neighbours, has encountered serious setbacks in the face of Russia's increasingly aggressive stance. Communication about what the EU does with and for neighbouring states is an essential component for the success of the revised ENP, especially given rising concerns about Russia's use of media to promote its own view of developments in the region and the choices of neighbouring countries as a zero sum game.

This paper seeks to establish what the EU's communications reveal about its status as soft, normative or transformative power in the region. The paper analyses the EU's communications towards Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine for a two-month period in 2016, after the adoption of the revised ENP. To guide the analysis, the paper revisits the concepts of soft, normative and transformative power. Comparing the scope and elements of these concepts, we suggest that transformative power approaches stress a broad spectrum of reform targeting future members, while soft and normative power address any third states. Soft power includes economic aspects contributing to the EU's (or other powers) attractiveness, while as a normative power the EU focuses primarily on norms. Using this framework, the paper finds that the EU's official communications to Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine represented a different mix of elements.

Communications to Belarus were different from the communications to the other two states, stressing normative and rights issues. The range of concepts addressed in communications to Moldova and Ukraine has been broader and more varied. The main emphasis in communications to Ukraine and Moldova were democratic governance (Ukraine) and economic reforms (Moldova). Therefore, it is possible to distinguish normative and transformative power elements in the EU's communications to the three Eastern Partnership countries. Last but not least, there is still a substantial share of messages that are event driven, that is, focus on specific events rather than on the benefits of cooperation with the EU as a whole.

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Contents

1. Waning power?	6
2. Soft, normative or transformative power	8
2.1 <i>Soft, normative or transformative power</i>	8
2.2 <i>Distinguishing the elements of soft power</i>	10
3. Recent studies of EU communications and their findings	12
4. Method and approach	14
5. Country results: structure of communications	18
5.1 <i>Belarus</i>	19
5.2 <i>Moldova</i>	20
5.3 <i>Ukraine</i>	21
6. Country results: actors, channels and topics	22
6.1 <i>Belarus</i>	22
6.2 <i>Moldova</i>	23
6.3 <i>Ukraine</i>	24
7. Conclusions and next steps	25
8. References	27
9. Appendix	32

1. Waning power?¹

For two decades after the fall of communism, the European Union (EU) appeared to yield the power to get neighbouring European states to want what it wanted, as Joseph Nye (1990) famously defined soft power. The focus on norms in the Union's relations with third states seemed to make it unique among international actors and led some to label it a "normative power" (Manners 2002, 2009). For states which wanted to join the EU, the Union did not only promote international norms, but encouraged a wide range of reforms related to democracy, market economy and good governance, earning it the classification "transformative power" (Grabbe 2004). Yet some twenty-five years later, the EU's influence on its neighbours seems to be waning and its main policy instrument aiming to achieve stability and prosperity in its neighbourhood, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), appears to have fallen short of its objectives. Whether defined as a "soft", "normative" or "transformative" power, the EU's influence is founded on a complex mix of economic attractiveness, interdependence, the promotion of international norms and the potential promise for closer integration attractive for some of its Eastern neighbours. Ultimately the EU's influence also depends on its actual policies and its ability to communicate them effectively.

Despite the importance of the ENP, the review of the policy commissioned in 2014 signalled a recognition of its shortcomings. The review, presented a year later by the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission Federica Mogherini and Commissioner for ENP and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn recognized that the EU's policies needed to be changed to take into account the different aspirations of its diverse partners in the east and south. Not only the EU's policies, but also the widely shared underlying assumptions about its attractiveness to its neighbours to the east, needed to be reassessed (Koenig 2016).

The assumption that the EU's attractiveness and conditionality can induce neighbouring countries to reform, become more democratic, and to open economically, dates back to the challenging, but successful Eastern enlargement. As an unprecedented crisis unfolded in Ukraine in 2013, however, following the refusal of former President Yanukovich to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, the Union's approach and "soft power" did not suffice to change things on the ground (Maniokas and Zeruolis 2014).

Overestimation of the attractiveness of its model (Romanova 2016) has not been the only reason why the EU's influence has been challenged in its neighbourhood. Russia has been presenting countries' potential integration with the EU as a zero-sum game, gradually moving towards a strategy using information as a weapon. The more unpredictable the situation in Ukraine became, the harder Russia has worked to communicate a zero-sum game perspective about, among other things, Ukraine's Association Agreement, the ousting of President Yanukovich, the annexation of the Crimea and warfare in Eastern Ukraine (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014). As analysts warned of the sophistication and scale of Russia's propaganda efforts (Chifu 2015; Gotev 2014; Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014), the EU's institutions and member states started to realize they need to focus on information provision and dissemination and enhance their ability to put across the EU's interpretation of events (European Commission 2014, 2015). The revised ENP policy, the EU's Eastern Partnership and financial support for its

¹ Research for this paper has been supported by country teams in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine. We especially would like to mention the contributions made for coding and analysis by Ina Ramasheuskaya (Belarus), Igor Munteanu (Moldova) and Oleh Grytsenko (Ukraine).

Eastern neighbours (especially Ukraine) are less effective if they are not properly communicated and understood by citizens (Kimber and Halliste 2015).

Targeting specifically information and disinformation issues, the European Council in March 2015 authorized the establishment of the *East StratCom* task force under the auspices of the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Mogherini. The main declared task of the communications team that has been created is to improve the EU's strategic communication with regard to the Eastern neighbourhood.² In June 2015 High Representative Mogherini also presented an action plan of strategic communication to address Russia's disinformation campaigns. The Action plan has three main objectives, namely:

- “Effective communication and promotion of EU policies towards the Eastern Neighbourhood;
- Strengthening the overall media environment in the Eastern Neighbourhood and in EU Member States, including support for media freedom and strengthening independent media;
- Improved EU capacity to forecast, address and respond to disinformation activities by external actors” (Action Plan 2015).

Also in 2015, a working group of media experts, non-governmental organisations and communication specialists were brought together to analyse Russia's media strategy and to recommend how the EU could counteract it.³ The working group analysed existing Russian language media coverage in the Eastern neighbourhood and prepared recommendations for ‘bringing plurality and balance in Russian language media (EED 2015).⁴

These developments suggest that the EU is beginning to take more seriously Russia's efforts to undermine its policies by creating a picture of a different reality (Pomerantzev and Weiss 2014). Russian narratives presenting the EU and the West as a whole as the enemy in a bipolar world have (re-)emerged. Russia's communication strategy actively targets Eastern neighbouring countries, the Balkans and even some EU member states such as Bulgaria or Slovakia (Chifu 2015; Kiseleva 2015; Sinkukka 2014; Wiśniewski 2016).

Yet it would be premature to claim Russia has prevailed as the new soft power in the region, as its own aggressive actions also undermine its image (Makaryshev 2016; Hudson 2015).

In Joseph Nye's original definition, “proof of [soft] power lies not in resources, but in the ability to change the behaviour of states” (1990: 155). Looking at the behaviour of the largest Eastern neighbourhood country, Ukraine, the EU has achieved more change in recent years than Russia's, at least in the realm of soft power (see also Moravcsik 2016). Russia's attempts to change the country's course by providing financial assistance as a way

² Some of the new initiatives target Russian language audiences and disinformation among them: Russian language websites have been created in addition to existing Delegation websites (http://eeas.europa.eu/ru/index_ru.htm) and social media accounts (@EUMythbusters, #DisInfoReview).

³ The study was commissioned by the government of the Netherlands and conducted under the auspices of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED).

⁴ Among the recommendations there were innovative ideas for supporting a ‘content factory’ for authentic local news and quality TV to be shared among Russian language broadcasters inside the EU. It was recommended to support EU-based Russian language news and television programmes to counteract some of the most blatant cases of misinformation and misrepresentation coming from Russia (EED 2015).

⁵ Clearly, the Russian intervention in Crimea and subsequent hybrid war actions in the East of Ukraine cannot be subsumed under the heading of “soft” power.

to convince former president Yanukovich to reject the Association Agreement with the EU failed. Instead it was the citizens, through the *Maidan* movement, that changed Ukraine's course. Their protests took place under the Ukrainian *and* the EU flags and stressed norms and principles that were seen as worth fighting for.⁶ Even if citizens have become less prominent as a power for change in Ukrainian politics after the *Maidan* protests due to the annexation of the Crimea and conflict in Eastern Ukraine, they still fight for reforms. Citizens that protested the failure to conclude the Association Agreement saw the EU as the vehicle for reform and improvement of governance in Ukraine. The question is, has the EU's role as a symbol of good governance changed since then, because of the Union's lack of unity and multiple crises or due to Russia's active efforts to undermine its image?

To answer this question, we need to analyse a complex set of policies and interdependencies that go beyond the scope of this paper. It is clear, however, that communications of its policies and perceptions of the EU are one important aspect of the EU's soft power and contribute to the effectiveness of the EU's policies. This paper will focus on analysing the concepts referring to the EU's model of liberal democracy and market economy as communicated to Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova.

The paper analyses the actual content of the EU's messages, as captured in official documents and public statements, in terms of key categories: democracy, rights, market integration, economic development, rule of law, security etc.⁷ The approach taken here emphasizes recent developments in official policy and public diplomacy on the EU's part after the ENP reviews.⁸ We start with a discussion of the related concepts of soft, normative and transformative power and their relevance for this analysis. Next, we review the findings of recent studies of EU communications and perceptions of the EU. In the following sections, the paper presents an analysis of the EU's communications towards Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine for the period of February-March 2016. In the second part of the analysis, the paper also maps the channels and actors engaged in diplomacy on the EU's behalf in the respective countries. Ultimately, we reflect on the content and actors communicating on the EU's behalf in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova.

2. Soft, normative or transformative power

2.1 *Soft, normative or transformative power*

In order to establish whether the EU is still a beacon and a model for emulation in neighbouring countries or whether it is losing the battle for influence to Russia, we need to define the type of power and influence the EU is expected to yield. The most influential analyses of the EU's role in its neighbourhood and further afield have developed the concepts of soft, normative and transformative power. In this section, these three concepts will be briefly discussed and the role of norms, ideas and communication of the EU's model will be highlighted.

⁶ We thank Natalia Chaban for drawing our attention to the normative aspects of the EU's influence on the *Maidan* movement.

⁷ The choice to analyze not only norms related content, but concepts referring to economic or security cooperation is rooted in the definition of soft power adopted here, which is discussed in the following sections.

⁸ Earlier communications and approaches have been thoroughly analyzed in the process of reviewing the ENP and the conclusions included in the ENP review and related measures such as the EU's strategic communications action plan. Therefore, drawing on existing studies for background, we focus on recent communications.

In his seminal article about soft power Joseph Nye argued that soft or “co-optive” power means “getting others to want what you want” and that whoever possessed it would be able to influence other countries’ preferences by means of “intangible factors such as ideology, culture and institutions”. Being able to establish international norms close to their own norms, he claimed, would make states able to co-opt others. Soft power, in his definition, would also entail having attractive culture or ideology and creating institutions attractive to other states and capable of constraining their actions (Nye 1990: 166-167). Following Nye’s assertion that developing norms to be accepted by other states as universal is an instrument of soft power, we can claim that when the EU spreads norms related to democracy and human rights which were accepted by many states in eastern Europe, through the enlargement process in the late 1990s and early 2000, the Union was exercising its soft power.⁹

A decade later, Ian Manners (2002) developed the concept of “normative power Europe” that focused even more explicitly on the EU’s dissemination of international norms as a way to define “normal” in international relations (Whitman 2013). Initially the discussion of the Union as a normative power appeared to be an answer to critics focusing on the weakness of the EU in military terms, but it quickly developed into something more, generating scholarship studying the EU’s normative identity and how it defined its actions in the international arena. Manners argued that norms, especially legal norms, have been part of the EU’s constitutive foundations and more important for the Union than for any nation state. The combination of the historical context in which the EU arose, its hybrid character and legal constitution ensure, according to Manners, that the EU places universal principles and norms (such as human rights or rule of law) at the centre of its relations with the member states and third states. The key norms EU stands for are defined by Manners as peace, liberty, including economic aspects, rule of law and human rights, supplemented by social solidarity, anti-discrimination, sustainable development and good governance (Manners 2002: 242-243).

In later work, Manners has emphasized the ideational nature of EU power, as opposed to material incentives. Normative power, in this definition, is rooted in legitimate principles, exercised through actions involving argumentation, persuasion, naming and shaming and, socialising in its impact (Manners 2009).¹⁰

The question of to what extent the EU can make an impact as a normative or soft power is linked to the question of how others perceive the Union. Even though they have developed separately, literature on the EU as a normative power and studies investigating perceptions of the EU address two sides of the same coin (Larsen 2014). From the growing group of studies that have asked the question whether others recognise the EU as a normative power, some recent findings suggest that beyond its eastern and southern neighbourhoods, the EU is not strongly perceived as a normative power (Chaban et al. 2016).

Last, but not least, there is a rich literature on the EU as a transformative power (Börzel and Risse 2009; Börzel and Pamuk 2012; Börzel and Lebanidze 2016; Dimitrova 2002, 2004; Dimitrova and Pridham 2005; Grabbe 2004;

⁹ Despite the important role it played, the EU was far not the only external actor influencing the post-communist transitions. Other actors, such as the United States, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) played a role in the early years. The EU’s role and actions in eastern Europe were effective in conjunction with these actors and in an international context fundamentally different from the current one.

¹⁰ There is a rich literature that engages critically with the normative power concept and its limitations (e.g. Forsberg 2011; Nielsen 2013; Larsen 2014; Whitman 2013), which we will not discuss further here as the debate is beyond the scope of this paper.

Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Vachudova 2005). In the 1990s, as the EU guided candidates from Central and Eastern Europe through extensive transformation and adaptations to prepare for full membership, the EU's role was so important, that it was hailed as a transformative power. The mechanisms that played a role in moving candidate states to accept the EU's conditions and rules were mixed, involving both normative socialization and (material) incentives and costs (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005). In the context of the EU's Eastern enlargement, the Union exercised "passive leverage" on its neighbours simply by virtue of what it is as an economic power (Vachudova 2005). Analyses of the EU as a transformative power are, by and large, based on the EU's impact across multiple spheres of influence **in candidate and neighbouring** states. Therefore, transformative power is rooted implicitly or explicitly in an integration model whereby the EU influences states which would like to join the EU or develop closer ties (Dimitrova and Pridham 2005). The reach of the EU as a transformative power is thus limited to its neighbours and potential candidates, whereas soft and normative power may be projected further afield. The success of the EU as a transformative power depends on a number of conditions, such as the possibility to include a membership perspective for the countries it tries to influence and the fit with preferences of local elites (Börzel and Ademmer 2013; Börzel and Lebanidze 2016; Dimitrova 2016). Even for candidate states, the power of the EU to induce domestic reforms is limited by domestic factors and in the case of the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, by Russia (Dimitrova and Dragneva 2009; Langbein 2015).

2.2 *Distinguishing the elements of soft power*

Comparing the concepts of soft, normative and transformative power, there is overlap between them, but also differences. A number of common features are shared by all three concepts. All three concepts, ideas, norms and ideologies, can make the EU attractive. Norms and institutions structure relations with other states, if these third states accept them as valid and universal. In contrast to normative power, both soft and transformative power are seen to include economic incentives and attraction based on economic interdependence.

In terms of the differences, soft power stresses more what an actor (the EU) might project (ideas, ideology, institutions and norms), while normative power emphasizes what it is (see also Nielsen 2013: 728). Transformative power is linked to the integration of candidates or external governance towards countries engaged in various forms of regional integration with the EU and so geographically limited. In addition, transformative power includes the use of specific policy tools to support specific, pre-defined reforms linked to the EU model of integration in third states, chief among these being conditionality.

The concepts of soft and normative power have theoretical and empirical limitations. They have been taken on board rather optimistically and uncritically by policy makers and experts in the 1990s. Defining the EU as a normative power has led to an almost apologetic discourse by some EU policy makers, which left many blind to the EU's limitations in diffusing its norms in practice. Theorizing the EU as normative or soft power has similarly created a danger of overestimating its impact (see also Whitman 2013). Currently, we need to bear in mind that the EU's soft power can and does decline as the Union becomes either less prosperous (as a consequence of economic crises) or less united, following the Brexit referendum. Last but not least, soft power, as critics have warned, requires a strategy and a "game plan" to be effective (Nielsen 2013).

These conceptual limitations translate into challenges for empirical research. The boundary between economic interdependence and norms in soft power is blurred. It is difficult to define where normative influences end and economic interdependence begins.¹¹ Furthermore, economic power and interdependence can influence states even without references to norms and principles (Moravcsik 2016). International norms promoted by the EU, however, may complement and strengthen the EU's economic attractiveness, or work in an opposite direction¹², resulting in a complex mix of influences for neighbours. The conviction the EU has adhered to – that it is disseminating and projecting universal norms – is not always shared by other states (Chaban et al. 2016).

Defining “soft power” following Nye (1990) as the power to attract rather than to coerce, in this paper we shall simply specify different components of soft power and establish what role they play in the EU's current communications, aiming, at a later stage, to look at how they are communicated and perceived. The components that contribute to soft power can be related to economic interdependence, financial assistance, trade, democracy, individual freedoms and (human) rights, norms, history and culture.

Some of these elements, however, belong to more than one model of regional integration: both Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the EU's integration models create economic integration ties and deal with existing interdependencies. The mix of elements and the emphasis on specific aspects such as norms are determined by the type of governance the EU or respectively Russia exercise domestically. Therefore, while economic support and trade are features of both EU and Russian policies, democracy and the promotion of specific norms, such as the prohibition of the death penalty, are part of the EU's identity and policies (as argued also by Manners 2002), but not Russia's.

Based on the above discussion, the EU's soft power with regard to its neighbourhood can be viewed as rooted in 1) what it represents as a union of prosperous states with free citizens¹³ as well as 2) its policies affecting countries and citizens in the neighbourhood, including, but not limited to the diffusion of specific norms the EU may see as universal and 3) ideas, messages and channels of communication, cultural links and historical affinities with countries in its Eastern neighbourhood¹⁴. When the EU emphasizes mostly its norms and values in interaction with third states, we can refer to its normative power aspects.

As we are interested in ideas, principles and norms, but also in economic interdependence *and* economic incentives from the EU to its neighbours, soft power appears to be the broader concept that can cover references to different aspects of influence. For the EU to play the role of transformative power, more is needed: targeted conditionality linked to incentives for reforms, provided in the context of a process that can lead to a country's eventual EU membership. Therefore, in our view, transformative power is not just a matter of a broad range of democracy, economy and policy issues the EU engages with. For the EU's role as transformative power to work the components making up soft power are supported by active and deliberate promotion of a broad range of

¹¹ As Manners (2009: 4) himself noted about normative power, it is often used alongside material incentives or physical force.

¹² Some EU norms, for example linked to LGBT rights, have been used in Russian media narratives to create a specific and negative image of the EU (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014: 19-20).

¹³ As discussed above, this component would be affected by disintegration trends in the EU as well as economic instability and crises.

¹⁴ Similarly, Russia's “soft power” would be correspondingly based on 1) its example or what it represents as an economic and trade power in the region, 2) policies (including current conflicts) and 3) ideas, ideology, culture and history and their transmission through various channels of communication.

reforms and the linking of success in these reforms to specific rewards, such as membership or visa liberalization (Dimitrova and Pridham 2005).

Further in this paper we will look at whether and how the EU's objectives, norms, values and interests are communicated with Eastern neighbours and establish how the various components of soft, normative and transformative power are mixed in communications with the EU's Eastern partners. The differentiation between these three overlapping concepts will be used to distinguish the EU's communicative emphasis in the second part of this paper.

3. Recent studies of EU communications and their findings

Critical analyses in the last few years have claimed the EU's soft power is weakening because it is losing ground in communication towards its Eastern neighbourhood, especially in comparison with Russia (Bogomolov and Lytvynenko 2012; Gotev 2014). The EU's messages towards its neighbours have been criticized for being ambiguous, uninspiring, lacking cohesion and being unable to compete with a more tailored Russian approach. However, there has been little in the way of empirical evidence to demonstrate that the public perceives Russian messages as better or more coherent.

In recent years, academic studies have focused on the EU's messages and their reception among elites and citizens in the EU's Eastern neighbours (Chaban 2016; Korosteleva 2011, 2016). In contrast to an earlier period when the EU's influence was examined largely in isolation (e.g. the literature on external governance, Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009), many, if not all, recent studies make an explicit comparison between the EU and Russia's approach.

Some have claimed that the EU has been losing the "soft power" contest to Russia – for example in Serbia (Chifu 2015; Wiśniewski 2016) or the Eastern Partnership countries (Nielsen and Vilson 2014). Next to political communications, the use of emotional narratives evoking nostalgia for the Soviet past by Kremlin-affiliated media outlets has been highlighted as a distinct component of Russia's new soft power (EED 2015).

Kimber and Halliste (2015) have presented a rich and informative analysis of EU communications in Eastern Partnership countries and practical recommendations for EU related communications in Eastern Partnership countries. They stress that despite positive trends, much of what the EU and its member states do is still unknown. Even though the EU is the largest donor to partnership countries, Kimber and Halliste point out that citizens are often unaware of its contribution and benefits (2015: 4). They take stock of communication initiatives in the Eastern Partnership countries and public opinion trends and make an inventory of EU initiatives in the respective countries that can be communicated better. The report argues that the EU has difficulties in adjusting to the new realities of communication and creating differentiated and targeted methods of communication of its activities, instead of relying on people searching for information themselves. The importance of long-term communication strategies is often underestimated and even when there are strategies, they tend to stay on paper (Kimber and Halliste 2015: 25). The most important finding in the context of this paper is that EU communication towards the partners often tends to focus around specific events and visits of politicians or EU officials, without sufficient explanation about the general context of the visit or the EU policy. As the report

rightly notes, “communicators need to move away from the standard approach using official meetings and events as the main source for EU-related news and replace it with important topics explaining how the changes and reforms will affect people in their daily lives” (Kimber and Halliste 2015: 26-28).

Recent studies of perceptions of the EU provide an important nuance to the straightforward argument that what the EU does should be better communicated to reach the public. These studies argue that what the EU would like to project and what its partners or neighbours perceive or take on board in terms of norms, are different things. They stress the importance of an actor’s image, linking influence to how an international actor, in this case the EU, is perceived (Elgström and Chaban 2015; Chaban and Holland 2015). Some have shown that EU norms are received by other states as potentially contested, sometimes converging, but sometimes diverging with domestic norms (Chaban et al. 2016: 18).

If we look at actual public opinion trends, the EU’s attractiveness and position in the region, as discussed in the introduction, are experiencing some decline. In all three countries examined here, the EEU is seen as a possible and viable alternative to the EU, with this trend most pronounced in Belarus (Korosteleva 2016). Public opinion trends from Moldova show a changing dynamic of support for regional powers, suggesting there is cause for concern regarding perceptions of the EU. Based on the Institute for Public Policy (IPP) public opinion barometer presented in April 2016, support for European integration has dropped: from 76 % in November 2007 to 63 % in 2010 to 41 % in April 2016. Meanwhile, support for the Russian integration projects (Customs Union/EEU) has grown from 45 % in November 2014 to 53 % in April 2016 (IPP 2016).

At the same time, the EU’s attractiveness is still considerable and based on the potential of free movement of people and education. In Ukraine, where the most positive attitudes can be observed, 50 % of citizens support European integration, as shown from a survey from the autumn of 2015 (DIF 2015). There is, however, considerable regional variation subsumed in these averages. In West and Central Ukraine, the view that Ukraine would benefit from European integration is shared by 77 % and 57.5 % respectively. Other regions have a majority of respondents that believe Ukraine has more to lose than to gain from (potential) EU accession. The main advantages of (potential) EU membership are considered to be free movement of people (39 %), welfare improvements (37 %) and free access for the young to study in the EU (34 %). Importantly, every fourth Ukrainian believes EU membership will facilitate domestic reforms in Ukraine (24 %) (DIF 2015).

A cross-temporal public opinion analysis drawing on public opinion polls in Belarus in 2009, 2013 and 2016 also shows the EEU and the EU are considered rival integration models in the region. While recognition for the EU is rising, the majority of Belarus citizens would still prefer integration with the EEU (Korosteleva 2016). Awareness of the Eastern Partnership has increased threefold since 2009 (60 %), but respondents also believe there should be a new, stronger framework for relations between the EU and Belarus and that its most important goal should be strengthening economic and trade relations (48 %) (Korosteleva 2016: 6).

The Belarus survey also distinguishes two different models perceived by Belarus citizens. The EU model is associated with liberal democracy, market economy, economic prosperity, human rights and individual freedoms (Kurki 2010; Korosteleva 2016: 8). The EEU, on the other hand, is associated with a model seen as closer to Belarus’ own and containing elements of “social democracy”, albeit containing “a curious mix of qualities” (Korosteleva 2016: 8). Market economy and economic cooperation are seen as features of both models, although

in the 2016 survey, the EU and the EEU are perceived as opposites, unlikely to cooperate (Korosteleva 2016: 4). These results suggest that the elements which characterize the EU's model and mode of integration are fairly well known and stable: on the one hand, political ones such as liberal democracy, rights, freedoms and rule of law, on the other, economic integration including trade, support for market economy, economic cooperation.

Given the complex mix of incentives and norms contained in EU policies towards its Eastern neighbours and the amalgamated image of liberal democracy and economic cooperation in citizens' perceptions, we believe that the broad definition and operationalization of soft power adopted here, including economic and democracy concept clusters, serves best as a tool to analyse EU communications. It is, however, possible that the EU's communications would emphasize mostly norms and rights in which case it would be communicating as a normative power. By contrast, if the EU employs a broad range of tools at its disposal for integration, from communication to assistance, targeting a broad area of reforms, we can speak of communicating as a transformative power. We must note, however, that the leverage of the Union as a transformative power depends on much more than communications: the credibility of its promises and threats which are influenced by a host of domestic political dynamic and EU level factors.¹⁵

Bearing in mind this caveat, we would seek to distinguish economic, democratic norms and reform clusters in the EU approach, as we will explain in the next section. The analysis that follows will examine the whole range of concepts associated with the EU's liberal democracy and market integration model and establish which elements prevail in communications with Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine. By analysing the EU communications for a specific recent period, it would also be possible to establish whether they are still focusing on factual information about specific events, a shortcoming highlighted in the report by Kimber and Halliste in 2015.

4. Method and approach

As discussed in the previous sections, the first steps in evaluating the EU's soft power involve analysing the messages the Union **directs** at Eastern Partnership countries¹⁶ and the actors communicating them as part of the EU or on the EU's behalf.

In the first part of the analysis, we aim to establish the content of communications related to different categories that are part of the EU's general model of integration. The second part of the analysis provides a comparison of the key actors active on behalf of the EU or its member states and actors friendly to the EU. This part also provides some illustrations of the content and topics of communications.

The categories which we search for in the EU's communications towards Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine are related to all three images of the EU discussed above: "normative power" Europe, "soft power" Europe and "transformative power" Europe. Based on the theoretical discussion about the sources and expressions of EU power above, we start with core political science categories such as democracy (elections, separation of powers

¹⁵ Such as, for example, statements of heads of state or parliaments about a country's future relations with the EU (potential for membership or exclusion), national referenda such as the Dutch referendum on the Association agreement with Ukraine, public opinion about a specific candidate (on credibility, see also Steunenbergh and Dimitrova 2007).

¹⁶ Without, at this stage, making any claims about what elites and citizens perceive.

etc.), rule of law and rights (human, minorities etc.), then add mentions of the economy and market integration which are at the heart of the EU's integration model and, last but not least, include categories such as public administration, reforms (in general), harmonization of standards, typical of the EU's conditions for closer integration. We sought to distinguish concepts related to the three models and to assess them in the totality of EU communications for the period covered.

Importantly, the selection and range of concepts we used for the content analysis also correspond to the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership as defined by the EU in 1993 (European Council 1993). These refer broadly to democracy (political integration), the economy (competitiveness and growth) and the *acquis* of the Union (harmonization of standards and policies). The Copenhagen criteria can be seen as the foundation of the EU's transformative approach in the sense that they spell out for the first time a clear and comprehensive range of conditions which, once developed and specified by the Commission, indicate the areas of reform that the EU targets. We must note, however, that the EU's transformative power, as mentioned above, does not materialize as a result of the formulation or communication of what the EU might expect from neighbours. The credibility of the EU's threats and promises, as well as a host of supportive measures, from financial assistance to twinning, contribute to the transformative power of the EU.¹⁷

Normative concerns: issues of rights, human rights or rights of minorities or groups and the death penalty are included within the first criterion of Copenhagen but also in the EU's agreements with third states which do not aim to join the Union. When engaging with candidates, the range of political integration issues the EU raises is broader, for example democratic principles and procedures, elections, balance of power between different branches of the executive and so on.

Economic issues cover the general state of the economy or market integration. Following Nye's original discussion of soft power, we can classify references to economic reforms or market integration as elements of soft power. The transformative Europe mode of integration includes these political and economic elements, but also adds good governance aspects, especially public administration reforms or anti-corruption measures. Last but not least, for countries seeking closer integration with the EU, for example through Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade agreements, there are a number of categories relating to harmonization of standards and rules.

Based on this conceptualization and adding a category to code for event driven, purely informative communications (Kimber and Halliste 2015), we have arrived at a broad set of 18 non-exclusive, core concepts, rooted both in the EU's practice so far and in our pre-existing theoretical understanding of the scope of key concepts such as democracy or the market. The concepts and sub-concepts were specified in a codebook, which has been used to analyse communications from the EU towards Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova over a two-month period. The categories can be seen in Table 1 below, while the broader (non-exhaustive) list of categories and codes can be found in Appendix 1.

¹⁷ As this paper analyses specifically communications and does not include other measures such as financing, policy decisions or actions, we expect we can only say if the EU communicates as a transformative power, but not if it acts as one or has a transformative impact.

Table 1: General categories and clusters of core concepts as part of the EU model of integration

Categories	Codes
EU values	1
democracy	2
freedom of speech	3
rights	4
rule of law	5
civil society	6
market	7
reforms	8
public admin	9
economy	10
energy	11
security	12
regional cooperation	13
visa facilitation	14
sanctions	15
people	16
importance of mutual relations	17
general informative (event-driven)	18

In the analysis, we have interpreted each category to include related concepts and have coded these together: e.g. under democracy mentions of political parties and balance of power have been included, judicial reform is under rule of law, freedom of speech is grouped with media freedom and so on. The quantitative text analysis aims to establish the share of each concept in the total of concepts referred to in EU documents for the relevant period.

We have focused on EU documents and communications that have appeared on the websites of the EU delegations respectively in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. Delegations are the channel through which the EU transmits its messages and an organizational actor in their own right, so the communications placed there are our main target. In the second part of the analysis, we map the actors that have been active on the EU's behalf next to the delegations.

The period of February-March 2016 has been selected as one in which average type of communications are assumed to have been exchanged and few major events have occurred to focus communications in a specific direction. The exception to this is Belarus, where EU sanctions were lifted in February 2016, which has resulted in more intensive communications and commentary related to this development.

Three country datasets containing EU documents addressing the respective countries have been analysed. Each document has been analysed and interpreted by two coders, coding separately, checking for compatibility and resolving differences at a later stage. ¹⁸

¹⁸ Coders have checked interpretations and agreed on a single one before finalizing the country analyses.

As with every content analysis, the choice of unit of analysis affects the outcome. The smallest unit in which we have sought concepts and interpretation has been the paragraph. This decision is based on our observation that several sentences in a row (a paragraph) refer to one or two of our core concepts (e.g. reforms, democracy and rule of law, elections). Therefore, we expected analysis at the sentence level to produce too many redundancies and multiple references to the same concept, which are eliminated when taking the paragraph as unit of analysis. Given that a paragraph often contains references to more than one of the key concepts we are interested in: e.g. democracy *and* human rights *and* rule of law, the analysis has recorded more than one concept per paragraph.

To illustrate how the documents have been analysed and coded, we provide two brief examples here. First, a press release on the European Union Delegation (EUD) website in Belarus. The press release is entitled ‘Drawing contest "Let's save Lake Svityaz together" and dates from 2 February 2016. The first paragraph reads as follows:

“The project ‘Supporting the transition to a green economy in the Republic of Belarus’, funded by the European Union and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme in Belarus, invites children from Navahrudak and Navahrudak region to take part in a drawing contest ‘Let's save Lake Svityaz together’” (EUD in Belarus 2016).

Analysing this paragraph, we have found codes related to the economy (10)¹⁹, to regional cooperation (13) and people and culture (16).

Another example, from the EUD in Ukraine, is the document entitled “Statement of EU Ambassador Tombinski on the resignation of Minister Abromavicius”, dated from the 3rd of February 2016. It consists of one paragraph, namely:

“Disappointed to learn about the resignation of my good colleague and friend Aivaras Abromavicius. He has delivered real reforms for the benefit of all Ukrainians. I applaud his efforts cutting red tape, improving business climate, introducing transparent public procurement and work on making Ukraine more attractive to foreign investors. It is important that Ukraine's leaders press forward on vital reforms” (EUD in Ukraine 2016).

According to our reading, this paragraph contains references to democracy (2), the economy (10) and reforms in general (8).

Ultimately, the aggregation of concepts was done at the level of the three country datasets covering the two months’ period. Then the data was analysed to establish the share of each concept in relation to the total number of concepts per document. The results are presented in the following section.

¹⁹ The numbers in brackets refer to the codes specified above in Table 1.

5. Country results: structure of communications

The number of official communications for the designated period is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Sample size per country for February-March 2016

Country	EU documents	Total paragraphs	Concepts per sample*
Belarus	14	106	160
Moldova	15	139	229
Ukraine	33	128	176

*Total in all documents for the two-month period.

The analysis per country shows the content of EU communications has varied between the three countries. Table 3 presents the top four concepts as share of total communications per country.

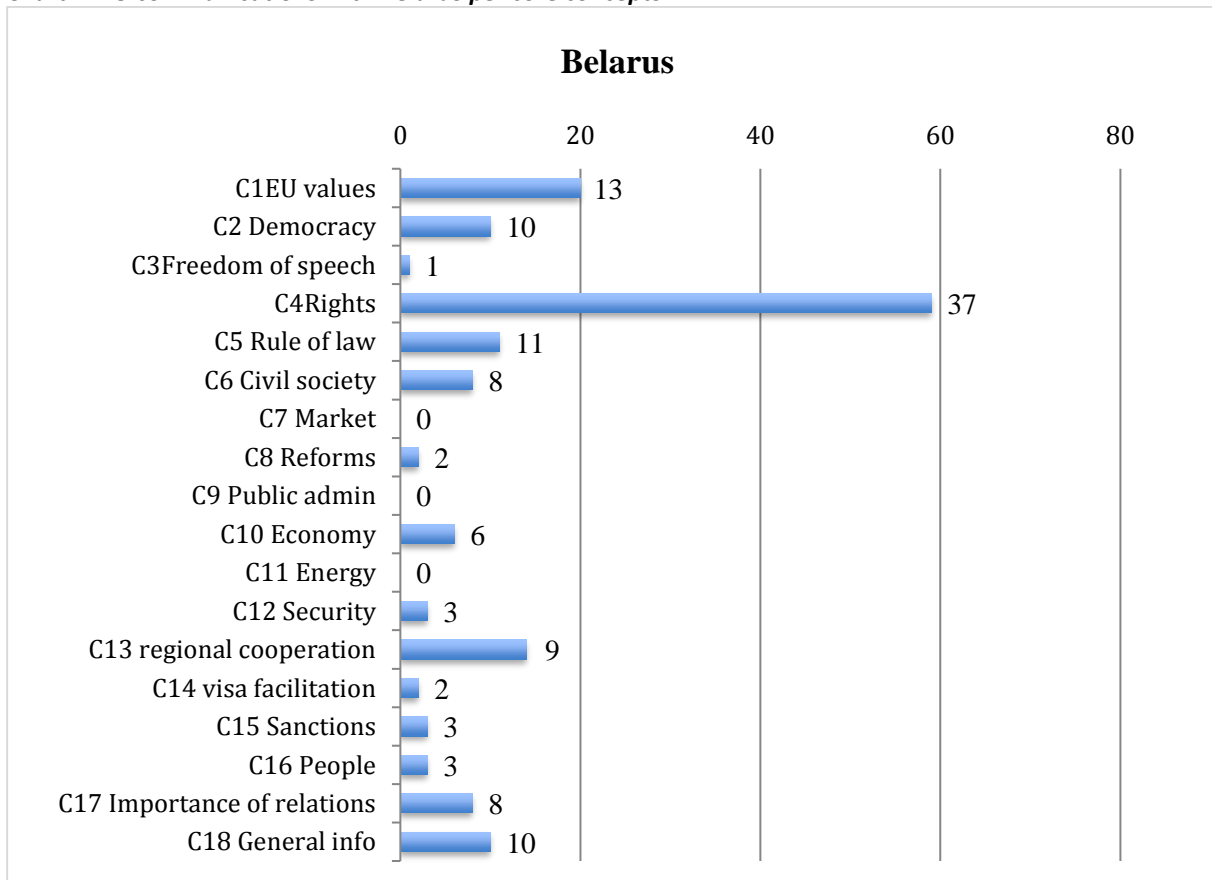
Table 3: Most mentioned concepts as part of the totals per country

Country	Highest share	2 nd	3 rd	4 th
Belarus	Rights 37%	EU values 13%	Regional coop 9%	Rule of law 7%
Moldova	Reforms 30%	The economy 17%	General info 9%	The market 7%
Ukraine	Democracy 20%	General info (events) 13%	The economy 10%	Rule of law 10%

To discuss the country results in some more depth, they are presented separately in the following charts.

5.1 Belarus

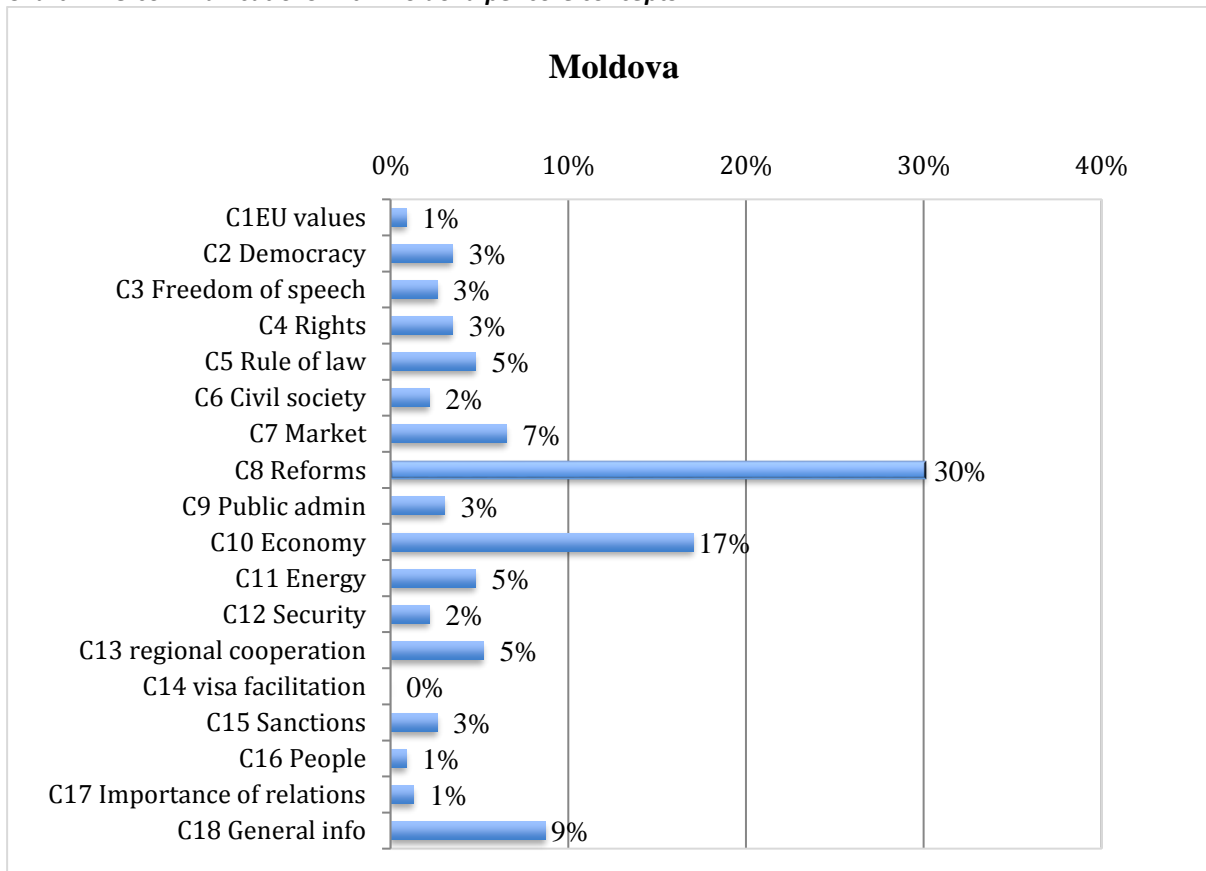
Chart 1: EU communications with Belarus per core concepts



The results for Belarus are quite unevenly distributed between the various core concepts. The bulk of communications, 37% of all concepts referred to, are about rights.²⁰ The second largest set of references is to EU norms and values in general (13%). Together these make half of all concepts referred to by the EU. Then follow references to regional cooperation (9%), rule of law (7%), democracy (6%) and general information (6%). We can safely conclude that the emphasis of the EU's communications in the relevant period has been on rights, values and democracy. Based on these results and bearing in mind the necessary caution given the limited period of time, we can conclude that the EU has communicated towards Belarus as a normative power.

²⁰ It should be noted that the bulk of these references come from one large document.

5.2 Moldova

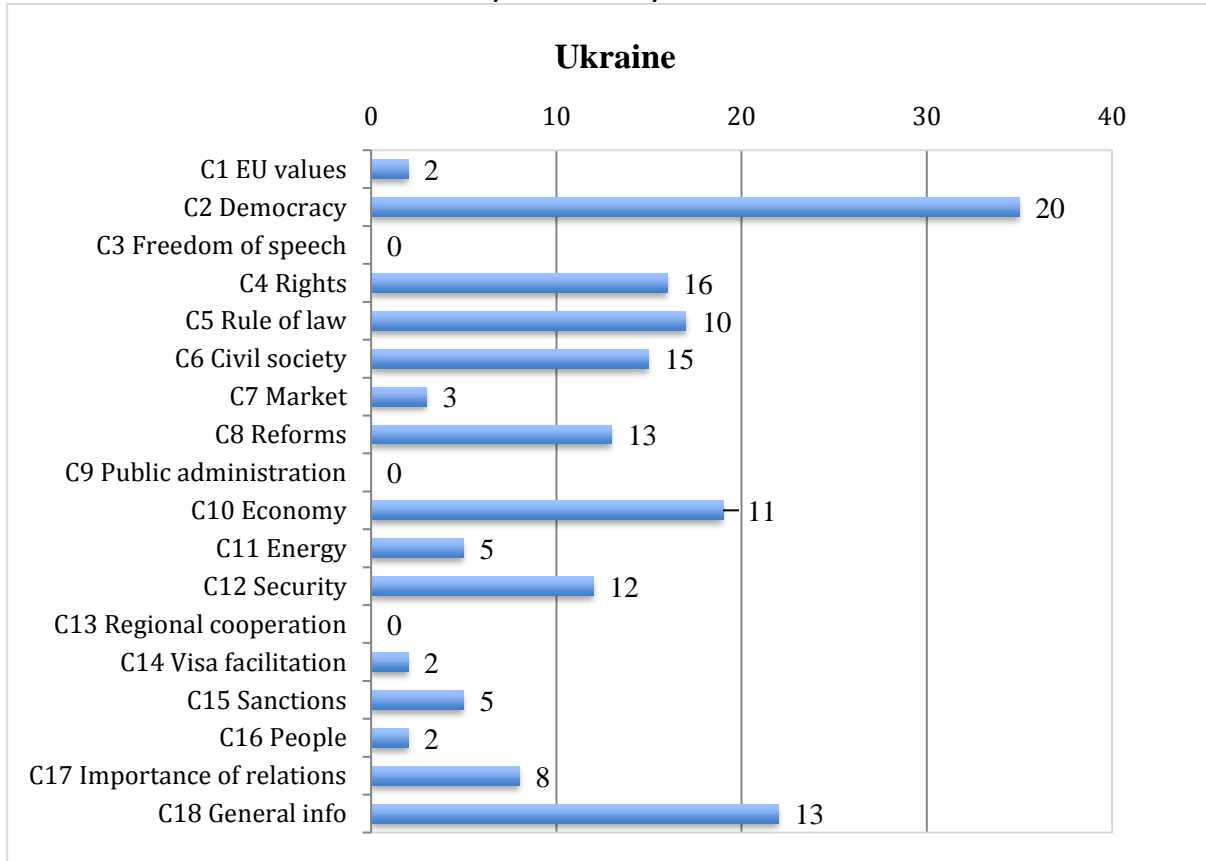
Chart 2: EU communications with Moldova per core concepts

The set of concepts that the EU has discussed and communicated to Moldova is more varied than Belarus, but less varied than Ukraine, as evident also from the next chart. The emphasis in Moldova is clearly on reforms, represented by one third of all communicated concepts (30%), followed by the economy (17%). If we focus on the largest share of concepts communicated by the EU, the Union communicates with an emphasis on transformation and support for Moldova's economy. The share of communication that has been event driven, purely informative, is relatively high at 9%. Based on the sample for our two month period, the EU has communicated towards Moldova as a transformative power.

5.3 Ukraine

Chart 3 presents the mix of concepts in the communications from the EU to Ukraine. The most important categories of concepts are discussed after the chart.

Chart 3: The EU communications to Ukraine per core concepts



The results for Ukraine show that democracy, as a general concept or the various sub-concepts associated with it, has had the most prominent place in the EU communications towards Ukraine in the examined period (20% of all concepts). The second largest category is purely informative, exemplifying the dominance of “event-driven communication” (13%) previously noted by Kimber and Halliste (2015: 28). Third, was reference to the economy, development and trade (11%), followed by rule of law (10%), rights (9%), civil society (9%) and reforms in general (8%).

The relatively high share of references to civil society in the EU’s documents and communications to Ukraine is particularly interesting. The EU has a dedicated programme supporting civil society in Ukraine, active since 2014. The partnership between the EU and Ukrainian civil society is promising, given the active role Ukrainian civil society has played in reform, and also in EU related communications (Kimber and Halliste 2015: 22).

On the whole, the EU has communicated with Ukraine on a broad range of topics across the board and references to various concepts are quite balanced and evenly spread. The communicated concepts are consistent with the EU’s declared objectives and interests, norms and values. The emphasis on democracy and economy and rule of law in the analysed communications suggests the EU is behaving towards Ukraine as a transformative power.

6. Country results: actors, channels and topics

The analysis in the previous section captured only the official EU communications as found on the Delegation websites. The EU delegations are active and important actors communicating EU policy. Next to this, the delegations play an organizational function, acting as hosts and intermediaries for high level visits. In each of the three countries, there have been more actors engaging in public diplomacy and communicating the EU's values, norms and positions. In the second part of the analysis, we have looked to provide a broader picture of the actors communicating on the EU and member states' behalf and mapped the most active actors per country for the same period.

Country experts have identified the most important actors active on behalf of the EU and have highlighted important topics of communication. The levels of activity of specific actors have been determined by assessing interviews and communications by these actors in the relevant period. The qualitative analysis has been complemented by expert interviews involving several experts per country.

6.1 Belarus

The results for Belarus are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Actors active on behalf of/ EU/member states in Belarus

EU Institutions			
<i>Commission</i>	+		
<i>EAS</i>	+		
<i>Delegation</i>	+		
<i>European Parliament</i>			
Member states	<i>Active governments</i>	<i>Active ambassador</i>	<i>Active technical assistance</i>
Germany		+	+
UK		+	+
Lithuania	+	+	+

Given that the period in question has been one of renewed activities in mutual relations, it is no surprise that representatives of EU institutions have been quite active in communications with Belarus. The Head of the EU Delegation to Belarus has been particularly active in the period in question, with media interviews focusing on economic assistance and forthcoming elections. Commissioner Hahn has also been active and received media attention in the country. On behalf of member states governments, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius has been particularly active and received media attention. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, Miklós Haraszti, albeit not an EU representative, should also be mentioned with his interview focusing on the human rights situation in Belarus. This intervention illustrates the results of the quantitative analysis of communications in the previous section.

Importantly, despite the fact that quite a few EU actors have targeted the Belarusian audience with their messages, due to the limited number of channels through which EU-related messages are relayed (mostly online non-government media), the public appeared only vaguely aware of the EU policy towards Belarus.

6.2 Moldova

The results for Moldova are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Actors active on behalf of the EU/member states in Moldova

EU institutions			
Commission	+		
EAS	+		
Delegation	+		
European Parliament	+		
Member states	Active governments	Active ambassador	Active technical assistance
Belgium		+	n.a.
Czech Republic	+	+	
France		+	
Germany		+	
Hungary		+	
Italy		+	
Netherlands		+	
Poland		+	
Romania		+	
Sweden	+	+	
UK		+	

An Association Council meeting with Moldova was held in March 2016 and has been reflected in the dataset of documents and communications. Remarkably, a great number of the EU's institutions have engaged with Moldova during the period in question. Next to the Council of Ministers, the EU's Head of Foreign and Security Policy Mogherini and Commissioner Hahn, the role of the European Parliament (rapporteur Petras Austrevicius, as well as the Head of the Joint Parliamentary Committee Andi Cristea) should also be noted. As in the other two countries examined here, alongside the EU institutions, the most prominent voices transmitting the EU's messages in the domestic arena are the ambassadors of EU member states. The number of actors, especially ambassadors that have been active on behalf of the EU and its member states in Moldova in the chosen period has been quite large, the largest among the countries examined here, suggesting developing relations. Next to this, it can be noted that experts associated with various think tanks (Foreign Policy Association, Institute for Development and Social Initiatives IDIS, Expert-Group, IPP, Promo-Lex) have shared and promoted various ideas and initiatives, actively working to inform the public of development of relations with the EU.

6.3 Ukraine

Table 6 shows the most active member states and institutions in Ukraine.

Table 6: Actors active on behalf of the EU/member states in Ukraine

EU institutions			
Commission	+		
EAS	+		
Delegation	+		
European Parliament			
Member states	Active ambassador	Active government	Active technical assistance
Germany	+	+	+
France	+	+	
UK	+	+	+
Sweden	+	+	+
Netherlands			+
Poland		+	
Lithuania	+	+	

As can be seen from the table above, there are three member states which have been publicly active on EU-related issues in all three dimensions: Germany, the UK and Sweden. Two more member states have been active in two out of three dimensions: France and Lithuania have active ambassadors and public presence of the government, but no significant bilateral technical assistance. Two other member states have concentrated most of their public presence in one dimension: Poland – on the active public presence of its government and the Netherlands – on the technical assistance programme.

The topics covered by the EU-related actors described above in the selected period of time refer to political developments in Ukraine (e.g. EU reaction to the resignation of the reform-oriented minister of economic development and trade), and to the conflict in the East and Ukraine-Russia relations (statements on the Nadiya Savchenko case, on Crimea, and the Normandy process).

The EU member state embassies have used their websites as a channel of communication, although one can doubt how effective this channel can be. The content and the frequency of updates on the embassies websites have varied significantly: from approximately three important messages per month on the websites of France, the UK and Sweden to only one significant publication on EU-related issues in two months on the website of the Netherlands' embassy.²¹

Next to the institutions and member states noted in the table, the role the UNDP local office has played should be noted. Although not (strictly) speaking on behalf of the EU, the UNDP is clearly an international actor with a

²¹ News and publications for the selected time period (February-March 2016) were no longer available on the websites of some of the embassies (Germany and Poland).

similar normative orientation. It communicated on similar issues and has been an active and engaged actor in the period in question.

7. Conclusions and next steps

The EU communications analysed above for the period of February-March 2016 provide a valuable initial overview of trends and actors, even if the limited timespan of the analysis requires caution in generalizing the findings.

From the first part of the analysis, we can conclude that in terms of content, the EU's communications towards these three different countries vary to a considerable degree, fitting with the new differentiated ENP approach. Towards Ukraine, the EU communicates by referring to a full range of areas of engagement, from democracy to security to the economy. The emphasis in the period in question has been on democracy. Setting these results next to public opinion surveys from Ukraine that highlight the aspirations of Ukrainians for freedom of movement, welfare improvement and education opportunities, we can conclude that the EU has the tools to make an impact as a transformative power. Further testing of this preliminary finding through discussions with citizens and focus groups is a necessary step to establish which EU communications reach citizens and what citizens make of them. The importance of regional variation in attitudes in Ukraine noted in the 2015 survey (DIF 2015) should be taken into account in experiments aiming to establish whether citizens are more attached to integration with the EU or the EEU.

By comparison, communication towards Belarus has been more one-sided, focusing on rights and EU values. Based on the share of concepts referring to rights in the total mix of communications to Belarus in the covered period, we can say that the EU presents itself more as a normative power. There are important questions, however, regarding the potential reception of the EU's messages: we see that the reception of EU's norms is not likely to be easily based on existing value orientations and expectations of citizens captured by the 2016 survey. The results of that survey show that two-thirds of Belarus respondents find that the relations between Belarus and the EU should focus on economic and trade relations, visa liberalization, and financial aid. The proportion of those who are interested in the EU's democracy promotion is very small, only 8% (Korosteleva 2016: 4).

The range of member state representatives engaged with Belarus is, as expected, narrower, reflecting the difficulty in operating in an authoritarian environment, where NGO actors friendly to the EU can be classified as "foreign agents". The media outlets which are receptive for the EU messages appear limited. Therefore the question of whether EU messages can reach Belarus citizens also needs to be explored further.

In the case of Moldova, based on the communication content and actors' engagement over the two-month period, there has been wide and active engagement on the EU's side, focusing on reforms and the economy. The engagement has been broad and suggests Moldova's relations with the EU are in an active phase. The EU emphasized economic and reform aspects rather than democracy and rights, but given the broad range of topics and the emphasis on reforms, we can say the EU communicated as a transformative power during the time period we examined.

The question of whether messages about the EU's support and policies have reached citizens in Moldova, remains, however, open. Public opinion trends for the last three years suggest that, as discussed above, support for the EU is diminishing (Institute for Public Policy 2016). Russia's efforts to undermine the EU's image and promote its own integration project, either the EEU or the Customs Union preceding it, seem to be affecting public opinion trends.

The second part of the analysis covering all three countries provides evidence that member states and their governments and ambassadors are indispensable for communicating the EU's engagement in its neighbourhood. In each country, member states seem to take the lead, based either on the respective countries' strategies or on the presence of experienced and active ambassadors, or both. A number of active ambassadors in all three countries provide a voice for the EU's policies and transmit the EU's norms and values.

The analyses here, however, represent only a first step. They establish the mix of concepts and the underlying policies contained in the EU's official communications and transmitted by the actors engaged in the countries we examine. The presence of such official communications does not in itself ensure that the EU's norms, values and messages are disseminated among elites, media or the public. The processes and channels of communication, key elite and media actors, as well as citizens' perceptions, need to be studied to gain a better understanding of whether the EU messages have reached and can reach the citizens. Further research, building on this analysis, would need to test the content of communications for a different period. In addition, the perception of communications among citizens and experts would need to be verified. Last but not least, experiments targeting the impact of EU's communications compared to Russia's would need to be conducted to assess how effectively the EU communicates and to what extent are communicated norms and values part of the Union's soft power. The discussion and results presented here provide a foundation for future work and show that the EU's communications to Eastern partnership countries is differentiated between countries and concept clusters.

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9. Appendix

A non-exhaustive list of concepts and codes

Categories	codes
EU values in general	1
EU norms in general	1
Democracy	2
Political parties	2
Opposition	2
Elections	2
Politicians	2
Checks and balances	2
Freedom of association and assembly	2
Freedom of speech, media	3
Rights	4
Human rights	4
Abolition death penalty	4
Minorities rights and languages	4
LGBT rights	4
Rule of law	5
Prosecution	5
Legal procedure	5
Civil society	6
Non-governmental organizations	6
Trade unions	6
Market	7
Harmonization	7
Regulation and deregulation	7
Trade	7
Standards	7
Competition	7
Reforms	8
Modernization	8
Public administration	9
Implementation	9
Economy	10
Business	10
Development	10
Infrastructure	10

Economic growth	10
Funding	10
Support programmes (general)	10
Energy	11
Energy connections	11
Security	12
Stability	12
Border control	12
Conflict resolution	12
Peace agreements	12
Regional cooperation	13
International organizations (other)	13
Other regional bodies	13
Visa facilitation	14
Visa liberalization	14
Sanctions or restrictive measures	15
People	16
Scientific cooperation	16
Culture	16
Importance of mutual relations	17
General, purely informative text (event-driven)	18



The EU and Eastern Partnership Countries An Inside-Out Analysis and Strategic Assessment

Against the background of the war in Ukraine and the rising tensions with Russia, a reassessment of the European Neighborhood Policy has become both more urgent and more challenging. Adopting an inside-out perspective on the challenges of transformation the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries and the European Union face, the research project EU-STRAT seeks to understand varieties of social orders in EaP countries and to explain the propensity of domestic actors to engage in change. EU-STRAT also investigates how bilateral, regional and global interdependencies shape domestic actors' preferences and scope of action. Featuring an eleven-partner consortium of academic, policy, and management excellence, EU-STRAT creates new and strengthens existing links within and between the academic and the policy world on matters relating to current and future relations with EaP countries.