



# Getting the message across: How can the EU bolster its soft power in the Eastern Neighbourhood?

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## Introduction

Soft power is a concept gaining increasing popularity in foreign policy discourses, often stretched beyond Joseph Nye's original definition of "getting other states to want what you want" or exercising influence by means of "intangible factors such as ideology, culture and institutions".<sup>1</sup> In Nye's definition, it entails having an attractive culture or ideology, so "others will be more willing to follow". With relation to the European Union (EU), soft power has been understood as the Union's ability to project norms, ideas and values.<sup>2</sup> In the course of the 1990s, the EU's soft power, combined with pre-accession conditionality, had a considerable impact in promoting norms, rules and policies to the candidate states that aspired to join the EU, leading commentators to label the EU as a 'transformative power'.<sup>3</sup>

Nowadays, however, the EU's soft power in its neighbourhood is challenged by Russia's policy towards neighbouring countries, its communication strategy and also the spread of disinformation in Europe and further abroad. Successive crises and internal political instability are also affecting the EU's image and ability to inspire others to adhere to its norms and perspectives. Importantly, it is clear that soft power depends on the congruence between EU values and the values, aspirations and interests of neighbouring countries and their political elites. Next to its own success and the resonance of its values among other countries' political elites, the EU's soft power depends on its ability to **communicate** about its values, its model and its assistance to others. Furthermore, nowadays the EU's communications do not land in a neutral context, but in a contested and turbulent regional and international environment in which new ways of spreading (mis-)information via TV channels, social media and paid contributors ('trolls') combine with old-style propaganda aiming to mislead and distort actual news.

To investigate how the EU's soft power is exercised in this context and in the relationship with its Eastern neighbours, the EU-STRAT team researched how the EU communicates via official channels, what messages and news about the EU are disseminated by media in the Eastern neighbourhood countries (Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine) and finally how these messages are received by citizens. In addition, we compared the EU's communication strategy to that of other actors present in the region, especially Russia, and its tools and communicative strategies. We used a variety of methods, including text analysis and survey experiments, and collected original data on the content and effectiveness of communications.

Our findings show that the EU's recent strategy of differentiating its approach towards individual Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries is reflected well in its official communications. However, the analysis of the style and format of local communications and citizen responses to the way the EU communicates at present suggests that there is room for improvement in terms of effectiveness. Some of the lessons from our research are straightforward and easy to implement, others are more complex and need more evidence to be incorporated into a viable strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> Nye, J. S. (1990) 'Soft power', *Foreign Policy* (80): 153-171.

<sup>2</sup> Next to soft power, a concept used to describe the EU has been 'normative power', a term referring to the influence of the EU in creating and disseminating international norms; see: Manners, I. (2002) 'Normative power Europe: a contradiction in terms?', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40(2): 235-258.

<sup>3</sup> Transformative power is a term used to denote the influence of the EU on candidate countries aiming to join the EU.

## Evidence and Analysis

### *Communications via the delegations*

To capture the EU's official communications, we analysed 130 press releases disseminated by the EU's delegations in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine between January and June 2016. The content analysis showed that these communications differ between countries within the EaP region: in communications with Moldova, the EU focused more on **reforms and assistance**, while in communications with Ukraine, the focus was on **the economy and democratization**. By contrast, the EU stressed **human rights and democratic norms** in its communications with Belarus. Based on these findings, we can conclude that the EU communicates in **Moldova and Ukraine** as a **transformative power**, whereas in **Belarus** the EU communicates as a **normative power**. Another important finding of this analysis is that most EU messages are quite **formal in language** and the communication is very **event-driven**, often announcing a meeting of diplomats and politicians or events that are likely of little interest to a general audience.

The press releases of the EU's external missions are not necessarily representative of all channels of communication used by the EU. The delegations organize campaigns, events and trainings and facilitate contacts which are not captured by press releases but are vitally important channels of soft power. For example, we found that active ambassadors of friendly neighbouring member states play an important role in influencing public opinion and helping many understand what the EU stands for.

However, the fact remains that most press releases do not contribute to increasing the appeal of the EU and explaining in accessible language what the Union does for its Eastern neighbours. The press releases we looked at compare unfavourably with more recent and contemporary approaches on the EU's official website to communicating EU policies through infographics and social media to audiences in the existing member states.

### *Talking about the EU – and Russia – on national TV*

Television remains the main source of political information for citizens in the region, especially for citizens aged above thirty-five. Even for young people, TV news is still an important source of news. Following the evening news in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine for four months in 2017, we gathered unique data about how the EU is represented on major TV news channels. Analysing news about the EU and Russia, we established that most of the news items about the EU, EU member states, Russia, and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) were **neutral** (had no explicit evaluative tone) or **balanced** (presented different sides of the story). Based on 377 hours of monitored material, we did not encounter fake stories about the EU, indicating that at least the official news programmes are largely free from the increasing misinformation visible in the online information space. Our overview, however, excluded Russian TV channels, which are still freely available (except in Ukraine) and actively target citizens in Belarus and Moldova. These channels have been shown by numerous studies to spread biased information.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Our study also showed that news items on the Russian TV stations in Belarus more often had a strong evaluative tone (positive or negative framing). Furthermore, a report based on the monitoring of Russian TV channels conducted by a Slovak monitoring group MEMO 98, *Internews Ukraine* and *Yerevan Press Club* (YPC) showed that Russian channels present unbalanced information about international relations, uncritically positive coverage of the activities of Russian authorities,

One important finding of our analysis is that the EU as a whole is mentioned much less frequently than its individual member states. Many news items focus on events happening in Germany or France and on relations with **individual member states** and only sometimes discuss them as a part of the EU. Nevertheless, the number of all mentions of the EU and EU member states is higher than the number of mentions of Russia in the news items we analysed. Interestingly, the national news in the three countries covers the issues related to the Eurasian Economic Union very scarcely in Belarus and Moldova and not at all in Ukraine.

The mix of themes in the context of which the EU and member states are discussed is different in each country. In **Belarus**, the **EU received much less coverage linking it to the economy** than **Russia** did. The EU and its members featured mostly as actors in international events and political and institutional developments (such as votes in the EU institutions). Furthermore, when the EU was mentioned in the context of values, its image on Belarusian TV was not that of a human rights promoter, but of an actor that struggles with the challenges of multiculturalism and terrorism. While the EU got covered in an **equal proportion of items that had balanced, positive, and negative tone**, Russia received mostly positive coverage in Belarus. This is related to the direct re-broadcasting of Russian news programmes on Belarusian TV.

In **Moldova**, the EU and its member states were more frequently present in the economic news than Russia. The Moldovan news emphasized the **EU's role in the country's economic and political reforms**. Russia was mentioned most often in news items related to security and the conflict in Transnistria. Interestingly, **Russia** received substantial coverage in news items discussing **historical events and commemorations**, while individual **member states** of the EU received attention in news items discussing **cultural events and values**. In this set of themes, the Moldovan channels seem to strive to achieve a balance between **promoting European culture** and respecting the common historical heritage of the Soviet Union. The EU and its member state were presented more frequently in a **positive light** whereas Russia was presented more frequently in a negative light.

Finally, in **Ukraine**, the EU member states were mentioned most frequently in news items discussing **security**. EU member states were also frequently mentioned in news items presenting **international events and agreements in which the Union plays a role**. There were numerous news items related to visa-free movement agreements with Ukraine and Georgia, discussions of the sanctions against Russia and support for Ukraine in the conflict on its territory, and finally, European Parliament elections. The EU and member states were discussed mostly in a balanced or in a positive light, whereas Russia was covered prevalingly in a negative light.

### ***Actors and their channels of communication***

Apart from the institutions of the EU, member states, and traditional media, we looked at other actors and channels through which messages about the EU or Russia are transmitted and multiplied. Our analysis showed that in Belarus and Moldova there is a growing presence and **broad scope of actors** that promote **Russia** by focusing on the shared Orthodox religion, values, culture, interpretations of history, and language. These linkages are the basis of a narrative of the common identity of the '**Russian World**', which encompasses all Russian-

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serve as an instrument of propaganda in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and demonize Ukrainian authorities and the USA; see: MEMO 98 et al. (2015). Messages of Russian TV: Monitoring Report 2015, available at [http://www.media-diversity.org/en/additional-files/documents/Monitoring\\_report\\_Russian\\_TV.pdf](http://www.media-diversity.org/en/additional-files/documents/Monitoring_report_Russian_TV.pdf) (accessed 26 September 2018).

speaking ‘compatriots’. Combined with the targeted disinformation spread by Russian channels such as RT (formerly Russia Today) and via social media, Russia’s ability to spread a counter narrative to the EU’s has grown considerably in recent years.

How can the Union counteract Russia’s network of local actors in the region? A brainstorming event in Minsk with a **variety of local Belarusian experts** from academia, civil society, activist movements and media delivered one important insight: if the EU wants to be more effective in reaching broader audiences, it **cannot rely on communicating just with the self-described ‘pro-European’ interlocutors**, but needs to engage with other actors such as public servants, (pro-governmental) civil society organisations, local authorities, entrepreneurs and the general public.

In addition, the EU has shown a growing concern with online content spread by (pro-) Russian actors as well as disinformation and fake news more broadly. In an additional analysis exploring responses to fake news we found that **trust in fake news that is negative** about the EU or Russia respectively can be explained by **elevated perceptions of conflict between groups**. We found that if a person believes that what is good for Russia is bad for their country, they are more likely to believe the negative fake news about Russia and less likely to believe negative fake news about the EU. This effect is there only when a person sees that there is a conflict between their own country and Russia. Importantly, we found that the effects of conflict perceptions on fake news endorsement are more powerful than the effects of political sophistication, values, or strength of group identity. These results contribute to a larger debate about the role and impact of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation online.<sup>5</sup>

Although the studies conducted so far provide only tentative conclusions and there is no conclusive evidence yet if the spread of fake news or mis-information has a large impact on politics and society, some findings can already be highlighted. First of all, untrue (fake) information spreads online faster and more broadly than true information.<sup>6</sup> Second, correcting misinformation is often unsuccessful and might even enhance the belief in the untrue information, for example, because the misinformation has been repeated in the attempt to disqualify it.<sup>7</sup> Such findings are of high relevance to the work of the EU’s East StratCom Task Force, the EU vs. Disinfo initiative and other organizations and networks<sup>8</sup> aiming to detect and correct Russian (and other) misinformation.

### ***Framing international cooperation and citizens’ support for cooperation with the EU***

As a last step of our research we tested what citizens make of the information, communications and messages that they receive. We aimed to find out whether by framing international cooperation as contributing to various aspects of development in the Eastern neighbourhood, citizens would be more positive about links with the EU or Russia. We framed international cooperation in terms of common themes mentioned in EU press releases and news such as the economy, security, values, and good governance. We set up survey experiments in Belarus,

<sup>5</sup> Lazer, D. M., Baum, M. A., Benkler, Y., Berinsky, A. J., Greenhill, K. M., Menczer, F., Metzger, M.J., Nyhan, B., Pennycook, G., Rothschild, D., Schudson, M., Sloman, S.A., Sunstein, C.R., Thorson, E.A., Watts, D.J., and Zittrain, J.L. (2018) ‘The science of fake news’, *Science* 359(6380): 1094-1096.

<sup>6</sup> Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., and Aral, S. (2018) ‘The spread of true and false news online’, *Science* 359(6380): 1146-1151.

<sup>7</sup> Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K., Seifert, C. M., Schwarz, N., and Cook, J. (2012) ‘Misinformation and its correction: Continued influence and successful debiasing’, *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 13(3): 106-131.

<sup>8</sup> For example, stopfake.org, <https://hoaxy.iuni.iu.edu/>, <https://fakenews.publicdatalab.org/> (accessed 26 September 2018).

Moldova and Ukraine testing how different framing of international cooperation<sup>9</sup> might influence citizens' preferences for cooperation with the EU and Russia. Participants in our survey experiment expressed their preference for cooperating with the EU or Russia after reading a text with one of several frames highlighting respectively the importance of economic benefits, security, values or identity.

Our main conclusion from the experiment is that **thematic frames**—frames that are general and not personalized or emotional—of international cooperation have only very limited potential to influence directly people's support for cooperation with the EU. Nevertheless, the results of our analysis showed that the frames might be **more potent in affecting the beliefs of people about the effects of cooperation with the EU**. Several particular frames affected the beliefs of participants about how good the cooperation with the EU is for the economy, security, and good governance in their country. These beliefs as such are strong predictors of the preferences for international cooperation partners.

In addition, we analysed the relationship between the preferred media source of news and respondents' preferences for cooperation with the EU. Only in **Belarus** did we find clear differences in average levels of support for the EU: **those who use media sources alternative to the state ones showed higher levels of support for closer cooperation with the EU**. In **Moldova and Ukraine** some media types, including social media (when used as a source of political information), are associated with significant **polarization of opinions** about the cooperation. This is in line with a recent study that showed that exposure to opposing views on social media can increase rather than decrease political polarization.<sup>10</sup> The implication of these findings is that the problem of "echo chambers" or "information bubbles"—environments that prevent people from accessing information that contradicts their views—cannot be easily fixed by expanding the scope of messages that citizens are exposed to.

Finally, we analysed the results of our survey to see what variables are associated with support for cooperation with the EU. We found that **beliefs about the effects of cooperation** have the strongest and most consistent associations with support for the EU or Russia. Those who believe that the EU brings economic benefits or contributes to the security of their country, support cooperation with the EU more. European **identity** and the importance of traditional values also have significant effects on support (positive and negative respectively). Once beliefs are taken into account, political knowledge, interest and media use, differences across demographic groups and even across countries do not seem to matter much.

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<sup>9</sup> Framing here means highlighting and emphasizing one aspect of international cooperation (e.g. economy, security, values, governance) more and ignoring others. The frames were presented as brief text vignettes focusing on what the basis should be for international cooperation.

<sup>10</sup> Bail, C. A., Argyle, L. P., Brown, T. W., Bumpus, J. P., Chen, H., Hunzaker, M. F., and Volfovsky, A. (2018) 'Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization: Evidence from a Large-scale Field Experiment on Social Media', SocArXiv, March 19.

## Policy Recommendations

Based on our research and the recent studies on news reception highlighted above, we can make the following strategic and operational recommendations for enhancing the EU's soft power in the region:

### **Strategic:**

- The EU should aim to connect with **a broader audience** in its Eastern neighbourhood and connect with actors beyond its usual interlocutors.
- If the EU wants to increase support for European integration among the citizens in the EaP countries, it should focus on the **economic, security and governance** benefits of cooperation with the EU.
- The EU can, in addition, associate itself more closely with broad European values, culture and identity, including the **European social model in the broadest sense**, which holds wide appeal in the region.
- Since EU member states are much more often in the news than the EU itself, a better connection between the **image of the EU and the member states** would improve the appeal of the EU. Such an improvement could only happen if EU member state leaders would also make their pro-EU stance more visible, rather than playing the Brussels blame game.

### **Operational:**

- In its communication with its Eastern neighbours, the EU should employ **more personalized** and less formal messages and a variety of traditional and online media.
- The EU should aim to show the advantages of European cooperation for EaP countries with stories and images that are understandable, accessible and attractive for the general public. To reach broader audiences, the EU should further increase its engagement with the public **directly via social media and internet**, in a **personalized** and less official manner. However, social media communications are subject to the well-known bubble effects and polarization as we mentioned above, so other ways of bringing the EU's message to the broader public—e.g. TV interviews, printed media—should not be neglected.
- The EU should aim to communicate the importance of its assistance and its impact on the lives of citizens in **specific campaigns** by connecting to **societal actors** in the EaP countries.
- Conditionality targeting corruption and money laundering or other aspects of **good governance** can also be communicated and highlighted when appropriate. Country specific missions such as EUBAM in Moldova/Ukraine should also receive separate attention.





## **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.

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