



## ***Softening the blow:***

*Assessing the European Soft Power Shield Against Hybrid Threats in the Eastern Partnership (EaP)*

MSc Thesis

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The Hague, July 2024

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## Abstract

This research explores the role of the European Union (EU) soft power in combating hybrid threats within the security domain of the Eastern partnership (EaP). Contemporary times, characterised by conflict in Eastern Europe and Gaza, have raised once more the subject of European defence and security from state and non-state actors, both of which increasingly weaponise non conventional warfare tactics. Solely in terms of Russian-led hybrid attacks, its presence has been recorded in all six EaP nations of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine in 2020 (Ratsyborinska, 2021).

The goals of the European Union and its partners in the Transatlantic alliance have long looked at alternative tools to fight hybrid threats, often identified within the sphere of soft power. However, the divide between the objectives and the means to achieve them in foreign affairs is too often underscored by the EU, as the capability-expectations gap first introduced by Hill (1993) observes. While the toolbox of the Union has unequivocally expanded throughout the past decades since the creation of the Common Foreign Security Policy CFSP and the European External Action Service EEAS, a report on its developments in the field of countering hybrid threats in the EaP is presented. This aims to highlight the role that soft power has had thus far in furthering European goals, as well as the limitations encountered.

Incorporating a document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and academic sources, this report investigates the role that EU soft power has had in combating hybrid threats vis a vis its potential to reach European overarching security goals. A multi-faceted discussion on the various aspects via which the issue is to be addressed, spanning from the legal, economic, and political spheres, ensures a pragmatic and multidisciplinary research. The ultimate outcome is that of contributing to the academic debate on the potentials of European soft power for the EU security toolbox, and that of providing valuable recommendations for the way forward.

*Keywords: European Union; Hybrid threats; Soft Power; Capabilities-Expectations Gap; Foreign Policy; Defence; Security; Eastern Partnership; NATO; Russia.*

## Acknowledgements

*I knew exactly what to do.  
But in a much more real sense,  
I had no idea what to do.*

---

*Michael Scott*

I want to thank everyone that has helped and supported me throughout this time. It has been a long academic journey, filled with rich experiences and wonderful people. Being a student has characterised much of my life thus far, and finally moving on is as frightening as it is exciting.

Thank you to my supervisors Dr. U. Jaremba, and Ms. P. Kuchyňková, whose advise was always welcomed and cherished. Thank you to my classmates, without which this journey would not have been half the fun it has.

My appreciation to Raffaele Berzoini, Despina Panteli, Tim Vonk, Alexander Hadeed, and Paulina Ryos Maya. Their relentless aid has been vital to this endeavour, and I treasure our friendship dearly. Also thank you to all who have helped with this work, including: Keir Giles, Daniel Fiott, Torben Fell, Mircea Nicolae Nanca, Viktoriia Kulyniak, Teodora Drucec, Laura Iatisin, Avtandil Svianadze, Valeria Donets, Vlada Sanduleac, and Alex Natradze.

An enormous amount of gratitude goes to my family. To my father Maurizio, my mother Micaela, and my sister Carlotta, ever supportive of my choices. Without them, none of this would have happened. My life is a privilege and I have you to thank for.

Finally, a special thank to Riccardo Felloni, my closest ally and an (un-)expectedly wise voice in hard times. Much of what I am today is because of him and the lessons we thought each other along the way. This work is dedicated to him.

To my bestest of friends.

## Contents

Abstract .....	2
Acknowledgements .....	3
LIST OF FIGURES.....	7
LIST OF TABLES .....	7
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	7
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	9
1.1 Background .....	9
1.2 Problem Definition.....	10
1.3 Aim and objectives .....	11
1.4 Explanation of terms .....	12
1.5 Significance of study.....	12
1.6 Challenges .....	13
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	15
2.1 Hybrid Threats (HT) .....	15
2.1.1. Security .....	15
2.1.2 Hybrid warfare .....	15
2.1.3 Hybrid threats.....	16
2.2 European soft power .....	17
2.2.1 Power & hard power .....	17
2.2.2 European foreign policy.....	17
2.2.3 European Soft Power .....	18
2.3 The Capability-Expectations Gap .....	19
2.3.1 Capabilities & Expectations.....	19
2.3.2 The Gap, its scope, and its risks.....	20
CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	21
3.1 Why the CEG .....	21
3.2 Operationalisation of CEG in the EaP.....	21
3.3 Expected Outcomes.....	23
3.3.1 The four models .....	23
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY .....	26

4.1 Research Design.....	26
4.2 Case Selection: Hybrid threats in Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia.....	27
4.3 Data Collection .....	28
4.3.1 Document Analysis .....	29
4.3.2 Interview analysis .....	29
4.3.2.1 Interview Sample.....	30
4.3.2.2 Interview Format.....	31
4.3.2.3 Coding Tree .....	32
CHAPTER 5: POWER AND SECURITY.....	34
5.1 European Power .....	34
5.1.1 European Soft Power .....	35
5.2 Security Domain .....	37
5.2.1 Hybrid Threats .....	38
CHAPTER 6: THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP (EaP) .....	41
6.1 The EaP and Russia.....	42
6.2 EU Goals in the EaP against Hybrid Threats (Expectations).....	43
6.2.1 EU Strategy .....	43
6.2.2 EU framework and legislation .....	44
6.3 EU (Soft) Means and Resources (Capabilities) .....	47
6.3.1 EU-wide Means.....	47
6.3.2 The European Hybrid Toolbox (EUHT) .....	49
CHAPTER 7: EaP CASES.....	51
7.1 Moldova .....	52
7.1.1 Background and Hybrid threats .....	52
7.1.2 Counter-measures and the EU.....	53
7.2 Georgia.....	54
7.2.1 Background and Hybrid threats .....	54
7.2.2 Counter-measures and the EU.....	56
7.3 Ukraine.....	57
7.3.1 Background and Hybrid threats .....	57
7.3.2 Counter-measures and the EU.....	58
CHAPTER 8: SOFT POWER AND HYBRID THREATS .....	60
8.1 The Capability-Expectations Gap .....	60
8.1.1 Practice theory.....	60
8.1.2 Scope and limitations .....	61
8.2 The Spectrum of Perspectives:.....	62

8.2.1 Interviews with EU officials, analysts and EaP citizens .....	62
8.3. Role of Soft Power in Combating Hybrid Threats.....	66
8.3.1 Case Studies & Interviews .....	67
CHAPTERS 9: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	69
9.1 Results of findings .....	69
9.1.1 The Resulting Model (s).....	70
9.2 Policy Recommendations.....	72
9.3 Contribution to theory .....	74
9.4 Limitations of Research .....	75
REFERENCES: .....	77
DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP.....	84

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Overview of the theoretical framework on the Capability-Expectations Gap.

Figure 2: Coding tree for the interview analysis.

Figure 3: Distribution of actors, tools, domains, and activity of hybrid threats.

Figure 4: Representation of the resulting model of the Capability-Expectations Gap.

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Methodology of the (sub-) research questions, along with measurements and data sources.

Table 2: Objectives of the Russian hybrid strategies for EaP countries.

Table 3: Overview of the interview sample.

Table 4: Structure and format of the interview analysis.

Table 5: European Union documents on security policy and hybrid threats.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AA: Association Agreement

CARD: Coordinated Annual Review on Defence

CEG: Capability-Expectations Gap

CERT-EU: Ever Emergency Response Team

CFSP: Common Foreign and Security Policy

CSDP: Common Security and Defence policy

DCFTA: Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area

EDA: European Defence Agency

EDF: European Defence Fund

EEAS: European External Action Service

ENISA: European Network and Information Security Agency

ENP: European Neighbourhood Policy

EU: European Union

EU INTCENT: EU Intelligence and Situation Centre

EUMM: European Union Monitoring Mission to Georgia

EUPM: European Union Partnership Mission to Moldova

EURHRT: EU Hybrid Rapid Response Teams

ECSSO: European Cyber Security Organisation

EaP: Eastern Partnership

HT: Hybrid Threats

Hybrid CoE: Hybrid Centre for Excellence

MEP: Member of European Parliament

MS: Member State (of the EU)

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NGO: Non Governmental organisation

PCA: Partnership and Cooperation Agreement

PESCO: Permanent Structured Cooperation

USSR: Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics



# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*'The EU and NATO need more help to navigate a world shaped by destructive new technologies that are changing the nature of conflict and warfare, increasingly spread by actors like Russia.'*

Quote from Kolinda Grabar, Former President of Croatia.

In conversation with Author and others at GLOBSEC Public-Private Dialogue "Eastern Flank's Expectations from the NATO Summit".

June 11th 2024.

## 1.1 Background

The Russian aggression in Ukraine on February 2022 has re-opened the Pandora's box of security concerns for all of Europe and beyond. From Eastern Asia to North America, allies, partners, competitors, and rivals have taken the time to turn to Eastern Europe once more in light of this conflict. Nonetheless, what is commonly referred to as Eastern Europe has long been the subject of warfare and disputes. The geopolitical position of many of its nations has long provided incentives to alternate between cooperation and conflict, both for military and economic necessities such as commerce and political influence (Kaspars, 2022).

Since the end of the Cold War and the fall of the USSR, the multipolar division of power across the area has observed a substantially shaky security framework carefully preserved by various actors. In 2014 nevertheless, with its informal annexation of the Crimean peninsula, Russia has re-awaken old feuds in the region, along with newer fragilities in the food chain and energy supply routes (Kaldor 2016). This has all be accompanied by a continued effort by many regional, like Russia and the EU, as well as distant actors, such as China, to promote their vision and interests across Eastern Europe (Stefan, 2023). Examples of this are especially visible in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (Gahler, 2021). Inherently, the competition that has generated continues to incentives coercive measures of influencing these countries' economies, governance, and public opinion (Stefan, 2023). These, historically referred to with such terms as political warfare and active measures throughout the Cold War, already highlighted the Soviet Union, and later the Russian federation, as its most refined and effective actor (G. Kennan, quoted by Rid. 2020). As the general security landscape becomes more volatile and complex, these coercive unconventional methods, most contemporarily identified as hybrid threats, have been fuelling regional instability, inequality, and social tensions (Stefan, 2023). From disinformation and propaganda, to economic dependencies and political corruption, these unconventional tools have been increasing in both quantity and quality, ever more appealable to such actors that are eager to expand their influence and ambitions in the EaP region (Gogolashvili, Paşa, Hovhannisyan, Ohiienko et al., 2019). All this has been furthered fuelled by the relentless technological advancements made in the field of the digital world.

Ultimately, the role of hybrid threats in the security framework of the EaP has been recognised by both the EU and NATO as rising concern for the maintaining of governance and security (Ratsyborinska, 2022). The concept was formally addressed by the EU Commission in 2016, later reported as a major area of security policy in the European Security Compass and other related declarations (European Commission, 2016). Most recently, the phenomena has been included in the European Strategic Compass which identified it within the larger framework of security and defence priorities of the Union for the following 5-10 year programmes (Council of the European Union, 2022). This comes as

no surprise while so-called coalition-based hybrid and expeditionary warfare increase in their means and postures across the EaP, reflecting newer military and strategic thinking on the part of foreign actors like Russia (Ratsyborinska, 2022).

## 1.2 Problem Definition

To counter hybrid threats, traditional elements of hard power and security captained by military action have shown little success, and mostly come at the risk of further escalation of relations with host countries and neighbours like Russia and Turkey (Kuus, 2003). Alternative sources of influence and persuasion, identified by many scholars as soft power, have hence risen within the EU to safeguard its interests in the EaP, and promote sensible governance and institution building in the neighbourhood (Nielsen, 2013). Within the top25 countries featured in the global soft power index 2024 of Brand Finance, ten are EU member States, inviting a case for the assessment of European soft power in managing security concerns (Brand Finance, 2024).

Altogether, countering hybrid threats remains as one of the eight key areas of EU-NATO partnership of security for Eastern and Souther Europe (Olech, 2021). Broadly speaking, the priorities for Europe and its allies focus on rising awareness and resilience (Koziol 2022; Gogolashvili et al., 2019). Most notably, the goals of the EU are to ensure a common understanding of hybrid threats across the Member States MS; guarantee that the Union's and its partners' level of preparedness is capable of preventing, withstanding and recovering from hybrid threats; secure a wide range of tools for responding to these threats; and incrementally build on international partnerships with other organisations like the UN and NATO (EEAS, 2024). A twenty-two operational action plan drafted by the Joint Framework to counter hybrid threats has merged the work of various EU policies and strategies, from cyber to energy and maritime security. The resulting plan aims at raising awareness across MS; building resilience in critical sectors like infrastructure and financial services; crisis response and recovery; and expanding coordinate collective partnerships with NATO and national governments (European Commission. 2016b).

Whether the so-called *economic giant and military midget* that the EU is often compared to has been capable of playing a significant role in this regard constitutes much of the inquiry this research aims at availing (Eyskens, 1991).

The Union, long accused of failing to provide the region with a coherent and cohesive approach to unitary foreign policy (Debuysere and Blockmans, 2019), has proved incapable of efficiently ensure hard security of its neighbourhood. Most EU member states fail to meet the 2% of GDP target for NATO budgets, while simultaneously continue to invest in individual technologies and military equipments that create confusion and duplicity amongst broader European-shared defence mechanisms. But the economic and integrating nature of the Union has long been capable of attracting other kinds of cooperation, safeguarded, somewhat differently than through traditional military means, via socio-economic interests and institutional tools of conditionalities (Sapir 2022). These trends have overtime incentivised the EU to find other ways to fill the gap between spreading its values and imposing its will, largely via soft, civilian, and normative power. These concepts, while at times overlapping, emphasise co-opting and partnerships over coercing and forceful action. Nonetheless, while the second and third are concerned with the kind of power the EU is, the former relies on what tools the EU possess, which is context-dependent and subjective to change upon its own actions and policies (Nye, 2004).

Soft power is then understood as “*the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion*” (Nye, 2004), which depends ultimately on the posture of the EU, and its ability to turn such into concrete policies (Nielsen, 2013). It follows that the sources of such power are: economic, with trade ties and incentives; ideological,

with narratives of EU integration and rule of law; as well as values, identified by principles of human rights and democracy. These, as to function as attractive building blocs of soft power, must be continuously reinforced by the actor's willingness, and capability to assert itself as a leader over such areas, to legitimise its posture, and incentivise the attractiveness of its soft power (Landaburu, 2006).

Altogether this means that the existence and strength of EU soft power is directly dependent on its continuous capacity to back up its commitments with policies and tangible results. Overtime, this has meant the creation of a wide range of EU policies such as the Eastern Partnership EaP, itself argued to be a source of soft power (Runner, 2008). The EaP was launched in 2009 with the main objective to strengthen multilateral cooperation, both on the political and economic level, with the six Eastern European nations of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (Olech, 2021). Within the framework of hybrid threats, the EU has rolled out various programs and missions, largely of a civil nature in the EaP (Olech, 2021). “*Civil-military education and training for hybrid warfare*” (Quote from R. Johnson. Mentioned by Ratsyborinska, 2021) programmes are promoted by the EU, with and beyond its partnership with NATO, as practical tools to empower local communities and governments in their fight against hybrid threats. Economically, macro-financial assistance increases trade, partnerships and intensified political ties along with the obvious economic ones (Ratsyborinska, 2021). Targeting hybrid threats financing is also highlighted as a viable strategy according to the Joint Communication on Countering hybrid threats (European Commission. 2016b). External (Economic) input and the promotion of capacity-building in the EaP remain as some of the most applauded means of combating hybrid threats via soft power approach.

Finally, as one realises the potential behind the EU's soft power approach to security, despite its capabilities-expectations gap (Hill, 1991), this research inquires into its capabilities to combat hybrid threats in the EaP region vis a vis its wider security goals.

### 1.3 Aim and objectives

*Research question:*

***To what extent does the EU soft power strategy have the capacity to counter hybrid threats in the EaP countries?***

This research question aims to analyse the current EU security framework of the EaP countries, focusing on its soft domain, which includes various non-military areas of security such as capabilities resilience, economic and financial assistance, and strategic communication (Stafford, 2019). The study investigates the role of EU's soft power approach against unconventional warfare, disinformation and other hybrid threats in EaP countries, attempting to understand the EU's capabilities and expectations, along with the gap that stands between them (Hill, 1993). A case selection of the three EaP countries (Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia) is undertaken.

Consequently, the research question is subdivided into three subquestions:

- *How can EU soft power means and tools counter hybrid threats in the EaP countries of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia?*

- *To what extent are wider EU security strategic goals in combating hybrid threats met in those EaP countries?*
- *How are these findings suggestive of European capabilities to achieve its security goals in the EaP ?*

## 1.4 Explanation of terms

For the scope of this research, the following terms have been identified and defined as it follows. Most definitions are considered within the scope of the European Union, according to the goals of this research. However, as to provide a multi-perspective discussion, context- and actor- based definitions are also observed throughout the report.

### - **Hybrid threats**

A “mixture of coercive and subversive activities, conventional and unconventional methods (diplomatic, military, economic, technological), which can be used in coordinated way by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives, being, at the same time, below the threshold of officially declared war” (European Commission, 2016).

### - **Security**

An ambiguous term that can mean both an objective, say safety from violence, and an apparatus ranging from military forces to locking doors. (Kaldor, 2021).

### - **Capability-Expectations Gap** (within the scope of the EU)

A discrepancy between the expectations the EU engenders, and its limited ability to pursue the actual policies needed for fulfilling its envisaged roles in world politics (Hill, 1993).

### - **Power**

Power is the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants (Nye, 2004).

### - **Soft power**

The ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments (Nye, 2004).

## 1.5 Significance of study

The relevance of the research question lies in the importance of understanding the role of the EU’s soft power in the security domain in combating hybrid threats. Analysing it within the framework of the EaP is an optimal instance for the testing of European Common Foreign and Security Policy CFSP vis a vis its toolbox. The example at hand is made even more relevant by the contemporary challenges posed by Russia’s unprovoked war in Ukraine. As these geopolitical tensions escalate, economic flows and trade infrastructures pose a risk to Europe’s security (European Commission, 2023), along with other maritime, diplomatic, and social repercussions. Consequently, as its foreign

posture has grown in the neighbourhood, the EU rolled out various reforms and programs since 2010, of different institutional frameworks. These range from European funds like the European Defence Fund EDF (Marrone et al., 2017); Member State-driven mechanisms such as PESCO; to democratic monitoring schemes like Coordinated Annual Review on Defence CARD (Martial & Sus, 2019). Most interestingly, the European Hybrid Toolbox (EUHT) offers evidence to the relevance of soft power in the security landscape (Stefan, 2023).

Ultimately, from a legal perspective, the European Union has drafted many reports, strategies, and joint communications on its security priorities respective to each sphere of interest (European Commission 2022). Within the framework of EU NATO partnership of security for Eastern and Southern Europe, combating hybrid threats remains as one of the eight key areas (Olech, 2021).

## 1.6 Challenges

This research presents various positive points as to the relevance of the argument at hand. The geopolitical intricacies that revolve around the Eastern Flank and the EaP, along with the rising role of the EU as an external actor in and beyond the region, put this research in a uniquely fit position. The potential reach of this study is further enhanced by the author's current employment at GLOBSEC and The New Global Order TNGO, two European think tanks respectively focused on Defence in the Eastern flank and fighting disinformation in global affairs. The combination of both offer various channels for sources and opportunities.

However, a few limitations remain evident thus far.

Firstly, the timing is to take into account. Many of the events discussed are in fact currently unfolding, along with the continuous war effort in Ukraine.

An example of this has taken shape during the writing of this chapter, highly relevant to both the subject and the case study of this research. In fact, after months of debates and protests, the Georgian Parliament approved on May 21st 2024 a controversial "foreign agent" law that substantially threatens the work, and to some degree the very existence, of many EU-backed NGOs and initiatives in the country. The following have been accused of spreading controversial influence on LGBTQ+ rights, and attempting to stage a revolution (Gavin & Parulava 2024). The legislation was largely viewed as yet another instance of Russian influence and hybrid warfare in Tbilisi, to the point that it has been referred to as the "Russian law" in countless occasions, including by President Zourabichvili himself (Kadagishvili, Berlinger, Gretener., Cassidy., 2024). This showcases all too perfectly the modalities of hybrid threats currently unfolding in even the most pro-europeans countries of the EaP, as well as the attempt from those same actors to reduce and limit the scope of European soft power in the region. Instances such as this one suggest that much could change in the following months throughout the drafting of this study, and therefore, a strictly factual and proof-oriented structure must be followed to the detail, as to avoid speculations and misguided provisions.

Furthermore, the role of EU's soft power remains a substantially complex phenomena to observe and assess, which on its own cannot function as a replacement for hard power altogether in the security domain (Nye, 2011). To that point, the second challenge of this research is that of providing an assessment on the role of European soft power in combating hybrid threats while keeping in mind the impossibility to do so without considering and calculating the impact of hard power too. The symbiotic relationship between the former and the latter remains therefore essential in combating hybrid threats, as well as in its analysis as offered by this report (Nye, 2011). This report does not therefore suggest the complete substitution of hard power by its soft counterpart, but merely offers an exploration into the value behind the latter. Moreover, reporting on such broad geopolitical matters cannot be carried out without an understanding

of the numerous factors at play, from internal politics of EU member states to external influences of third actors like China and the United States.

Ultimately, as these are considered, the research remains positive in its capacity to deliver a substantially informative and potentially beneficial addition to the academic library on European soft power.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This reports largely stands on the analysis of three main bodies of academic discourse, namely that of European soft power; hybrid threats; and the Capability-Expectations Gap (CEG). Accordingly, the report, while utilising an interview-structured and document analysis, considers the work of various authors and scholars. The following are overviewed here with respect to their contribution to each discourse. Some of their contributions overlaps from one sphere to the other, as it will be observed.

### 2.1 Hybrid Threats (HT)

*‘Hybrid attacks against Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova are definitely being used to weaken their European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations and to force them to change their foreign policy priorities [...] This can be achieved in situations when these states fail, show lack of performance, or their population is “disillusioned” about western values.’*

Quote from Gogolashvili et al.  
*Hybrid Threats in EaP Countries – Building a Common Response*. 2019.

The discussion around the concept of hybrid threats (HT) can only be accessed through a matryoshka-styled framing of it within its larger domain, being that of security. The latter is indeed the first layer of understanding, as hybrid threats are tools of a wider approach, known as hybrid warfare, which itself is one of many (non-)military strategies and tactics relevant to the field of security.

#### 2.1.1. Security

As it will be the framing of many others throughout this report, security is a wide-ranging concept, whose definition heavily depends on the linguistic and cultural heritage of those who attempt at framing it. A West-East diverge is the first one can observe while investigating it. From the western perspective, security is largely accepted as *an ambiguous term that can both an objective, say safety from violence, and an apparatus ranging from military forces to locking doors* (Kaldor, 2016). Differently, the Russian dichotomy of security, referred to as *bezopasnost*, means “without danger”; and that of Ukrainian, *bespeka*, as a state of being “without troubles” and “unconcerned” (Shelest, 2022). This, along with the historical shift of the global order from a bipolar structure, that of the Cold War, to a multipolar one, suggests that the domain of security itself can, and has, be expanded to include elements well beyond that of security from warfare. Kuus argues that the concept accordingly expanded to cover more societal stability issues, as well as quality of life (2003). This gave way to a further re-elaboration of the term *security* within the *Hard* and *Soft* domains (Ibid, 2003).

#### 2.1.2 Hybrid warfare

Hybrid threats are also to be understood within their frames of action, meaning hybrid conflict and warfare, in which, according to some, hybrid threats serve as tools to increase ambiguity, muddy the waters of decision-making, and complicate the capacity of actors to construct effective responses (Raugh, 2016). The *hybrid warfare* term was introduced by Nemeth in his master thesis on the Chechen war (2002). Most generally, hybrid warfare has been framed as *a serious mean for a serious end*, where the *end* is seen as a well defined political objective (von Clausewitz, 1993). The concept was differently defined by Russian General Gerasimov as a new type of conflict, to be known as *non-linear warfare*, due to the blurring of the line between peace and war (Darchiashvili, & Bakradze, 2019). This suggests that much of the debate on such concepts remains substantially limited due to the inability of different scholars and actors to agree on a well defined dichotomy.

Moreover, it is notable to remember that hybrid threats, as well as the wider concept of hybrid warfare, are discussed in terms of its actors and means. The former for instance, has shifted its focus from non-state actors, pre-2014, to state actors, after the 2014 Russian occupation of Crimea (Mumford & Carlucci, 2023) revealing a tendency to perceive the approach within a specific context. The divergence is observed as one reflects on the following. State actors might undertake hybrid forms of warfare to safeguard their posture and maintain strategic deniability over wrongdoings (Olech, 2021). Differently, non-state actors might engage in hybrid tactics due to limited economic availability, or lack of manpower (Tenenbaum, 2016). Ultimately, the strategy changes in its means and scope depending on the actor carrying it out.

### 2.1.3 Hybrid threats

While analysing the academic debate over hybrid threats it becomes clear that the term is not a static one. In fact it is in its very nature to develop and change as our societal technological infrastructure evolves. Olech, as an especially renowned voice in the conversation, defines it as *a combination of regular and irregular actions (i.e. of varying intensity and frequency), both undertaken by armed forces as well as criminals, terrorists, or even political organisations* (2021). Others have described them as the emerging character of modern conflict constituted of new modalities of warfare (Hoffman, 2010). Nonetheless, as hybrid threats tend to be context specific, a more precise definition is observed in the European arena. The European Union itself has attempted to reframe the concept as *the mixture of coercive and subversive activity [...] which can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives while remaining below the thresh-old of formally declared warfare* (European Commission, 2016). This definition is prioritised over the rest for the following reasons. Firstly, it considers the scope of such actions as appointed towards *objectives* rather than simply as a warfare tactic. Secondly, investigating hybrid threats accordingly to the EU definition appears to be the most effective approach as this report utilises such body of work within the gap between European means and goals in countering the latter.

Altogether, much of the work of these scholars attempts to identify and discuss the concept within theoretical frameworks and models of warfare analysis. While helpful, this methods often lack in representing practical instances of HT, and risk constructing failing mechanisms for the understanding of messy realities, as it is the case described by Kilcullen of unconventional warfare (2019). On a more practical level, this body of work investigates the scope of combating hybrid threats within the goals that European Union has set. The European Strategic Compass (2021) and the Joint framework on countering hybrid threats (2016 & 2028)) are considered as main sources of EU wider security goals. More narrowly, reports by EEAS such as the countering hybrid threats communication (2024), and civilian missions like EUMM and EUPM are used to establish what objectives have been drafted.



## 2.2 European soft power

*'Soft power is a weapon of mass attraction'*

Quote from Chris Patten, former European Commissioner for External Relations.

(Quoted by Tulmets, 2007)

This body of work focuses on the role that European soft power has vis a vis the role that it could/should have in countering hybrid threats in the EaP. This inherently positions the concept as the main engine of this research, and in other words, the report's protagonist. Consequently, as previously attempted by many other scholars like Nielsen (2013), Smith (2015), and Tulmets (2007), this report aims to understand, identify, and measure the role of (European) soft power. To do so, it is necessary to explore the theories and definitions of different kinds of power that have in time brought to its *soft* domain, starting with those about *power* itself.

### 2.2.1 Power & hard power

The concept of power in political science is identified most effectively by Joseph Nye as *the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants* (2004). The definition is further complimented by Nielsen, who stresses that the means to achieve such *influence* are divided into two main domains of *hard* and *soft* power (2013). Characteristics of the former include its tangible and coercive nature, while for the latter its more about persuasion (ibid, 2013). These are to be understood as defining characteristics that shape both the means as well as the overall posture of a polity in its foreign affairs and external relations with others. While some scholars from the early post-Cold War tradition identify hard power as strictly military (Griffiths, 1989), more contemporary research frame it also within the economic sphere (Nye, 2004; Nielsen 2013). Indeed certain economic dependencies and coercive measures on the energy supply chain utilised by Russia in the EaP function as a powerful example of this, as it is further discussed throughout this report (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). However, this spillover of the *hard* definition from solely military to economic terms generates uncertainty over the nature of power altogether, as economic instruments, regardless of their severity, are largely not nearly as aggressive or damaging as military ones (Nielsen, 2013).

The conceptual confusion that results suggests that the nature of hard and soft power is context dependent, and their means are constantly in flux between the seemingly opposed domains (Gray, 2011). For example, as the cyberspace sphere was not considered as a tool of hard power (to be found in the hard security domain) before 2015, it was later moved into it. Oppositely, the energy sector, long assumed to be part of the hard discourse, recently shifted to the soft one (Kaldor, 2021). Nonetheless, as stated above, and as it is further stressed below, the energy sector is now likely to be shifted back into the hard power (and hard security) domain once more, in light of the Russian war in Ukraine and the resulting energy crisis which echoed throughout Europe.

Ultimately, this section provides an underscoring lesson suggesting that the very usage of terms like *hard* and *soft* might constitutes the confusion itself, due to the theoretically opposing nature of what is *hard* and what is *soft*.

### 2.2.2 European foreign policy

Consequently, as new regional and international organisations like the European Union were forming and evolving, constructing foreign affairs postures of their own, alternative dichotomies have been promoted to identify and define different domains and kinds of *power*. European hard power remains the least developed areas of EU foreign policy, and its dimension is limited in definition and scope (Nielsen, 2013). Understanding this, due to the traditionally intergovernmental nature of the European project, gave way to the elaboration of other types of power.

An example of this is investigated by Duchêne already in 1973, as he attempted to understand the EU (then known as EC) as a civilian power (1973). This civilian nature was emphasised by its economic means over the military ones; the “domesticating” relations of the EC’s members nation states; and the legal norms and values that tied them together (Ibid, 1973). Differently, a notion of European power as *normative* took shape in the early years of 2000s, supported among others by Darchiashvili et al.(2019). They recognised the impact of values and norms (hence normative) in the overall European foreign affairs posture, stressing the ideological strength of the Union (Portela, 2007; Smith 2005; Darchiashvili et al., 2019).

However, both alternative definitions have been critiqued, and said to have failed in representing the practicalities and complexities of the European external action. Firstly, civilian power is perceived as a source (Portela, 2007) or a mean (Smith, 2005) of power, rather than a domain of it. Differently, normative power is accused of being too strictly related to what kind of power the EU is, or attempts to project itself as (Manners, 2002). While laudable, this ideologically-driven dichotomy therefore implies a supranational nature of the EU that is yet to be achieved, which renders impossible such normative nature from being expressed externally (Ibid, 2002). This last point is made transparently clear by the consideration that the European Union influence and power cannot be exercised solely by what the EU itself is or says it is, but in fact by what actions and stances it carries out (Manners, 2002).

Ultimately, when investigating European foreign affairs and the power that drives it, one must analyse the ends of such power (Smith, 2005). Its definition shall attempt to describe the kind of power that the subject has and can use, rather than solely frame what it is (Manners, 2002).

### 2.2.3 European Soft Power

Firstly, the work of Joseph Nye cannot be understated when investigating the concept of soft power. Initially the term was coined by him in the 1980s with regard to US perceived decline, and utilised to support ideals of continued US influence throughout time thank to its cultural and ideological appeal, identified as tools of soft power (Nye, 1990). While his definition of it remains largely vague, considering soft power as the *ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments* (Nye, 2004), others have attempted to continue the discourse with alternative dichotomies. Some, like Patten, have also chose to define it in general terms as *weapons of mass attractions* (Patten, 2002). While others, such as Nielsen and Tulmets, highlight the importance of representing the concept within its specific context (2013 & 2007). The latter is especially providing a context-based definition of soft power within the framework of the EU and its history. Doing so, she captures soft power as *the adaptation of the experience of enlargement in the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy and represents a way for the EU to position itself on the new security agenda* (Tulmets, 2007). Accordingly, a separation between the classic, American-made, soft power and that of Europe is underlined, as the former solely recognises the soft nature of power when complementary to an already existing hard power structure (Nye, 1990).

Ultimately, Nielsen describes the concept as a value-based set of norms utilised to influence its [the EU’s] external environment (2013). Its work largely investigates the various types of power beyond the rational hard one, analysing civilian and normative power as well within the framework of Europe (Nielsen, 2013). All types of power are considered and utilised throughout this research. For the sake of this analysis, the report largely subscribes to the

definitions offered by Nielsen and Tulmets, as it is within its scope to investigate soft power within the European context.

## 2.3 The Capability-Expectations Gap

*'It is important to know whether the two sides of the equation are still out of balance, and whether they EU's presence or reputation have been severely damaged as a result.'*

Quote from Christopher Hill.  
*Closing the Capability-Expectations Gap?. 1997.*

It is via this last body of work, integrated within the others throughout the research, that this research attempts to offer a contribution to the debate on combating hybrid threats with soft power.

The concept, first defined by Hill as *the discrepancy between the expectations the EU engenders, and its limited ability to pursue the actual policies needed for fulfilling its envisaged roles in world politics* (1993) is often utilised as a measurement for EU foreign fairs and objectives (Nielsen, 2013). However, despite the recent growth in documenting on cyber and hybrid threats, as well as on European soft power, few have considered integrating the Capability-Expectations Gap (CEG) as a measurement of this dynamic. To achieve so, an exploration of the dichotomy of both elements of the gap is required.

### 2.3.1 Capabilities & Expectations

This model for the understanding of European Foreign policy was set up in a time during which European integration and treaty change was shaking up the entire structure of the European Community (Keohane & Hoffmann, 2018). Externally, the perceived unipolar world order which resulted in the post-dismantling of the USSR and the end of the Cold War was giving Western Europe and its transatlantic partners a political momentum for the expansion of their foreign agenda towards the East (Kissinger, 2002). Hill understood the difficulty in assessing the posture and power of an evolving polity such as the EU, and ought to analyse it vis a vis its foreign affairs components (Hill, 1993).

The first, its capabilities, are identified as all (non-)tangible tools available to the actor in further its actions and achieving its goals (Ibid, 1993). In the case of the EU, due to its evolving nature, the capabilities are perceived as non-fixed, and potentially limitless in their developments (Biscop, 2022). The evolution of such capabilities has also been fuelled by the incorporation of EU values and norms within association agreements and cooperation with third countries, creating a self reinforcing toolbox that expands as its counterpart does (Yilmaz-Elmas, 2020). Indeed the latter, identified as the gap's expectations, is defined as the set of self-given goals and ends that the EU places upon itself (Hill, 1993). These are also non-static since they change over time as the structure and reach of the European Union does. However, the expectations element falls victim to such changes, as well as to the internal and external definitions given to it (Hill, 1997). In the attempt to assess it, Hill explicitly identified the CEG within the theory of European foreign policy, where the latter is registered solely as that of the EU, rather than the combination of all Member States and their own definitions and goals (Ibid, 1997). In any case, these goals are strongly linked to the aspirations and instruments of the Union, causing once more for a revolving door effect in which the expectations shift as its means to achieve them do (Wright, 2011).

Altogether, the summation of these two sought to provide the European Union with sufficient evidence to its *actorness* in foreign affairs (Whitman, 1999).

### 2.3.2 The Gap, its scope, and its risks

The starting point of Hill's theory, as well as that of all who tried to add to his model afterwards, did not change much over time. To this day, the CEG is accounted for by the continued limited ability of the EU to agree, implement, and enforce its expectations; allocate its sparse resources; and construct a functional toolbox of instruments (Hill, 1997). This basic assumption unfortunately proves as relevant now as it did in the early post-Maastricht period, causing much debate over the developments that the last thirty years have brought vis a vis the gap (Nielsen, 2013).

Theoretically, the gap could be overcome by two actions. The first being the expansion of EU capabilities (Hill, 1993), via political reforms and military build up (Nielsen, 2013); and the second to reduce the expectations (Hill, 1993), via the limitation of internal ambitions and the goals abroad (Nielsen, 2013). Nonetheless, as stated by Hill, the purpose of such model is not that of positioning a target of effectiveness of EU foreign policy, to be achieved as soon as possible. In fact he himself extensively argued that the CEG was unlikely to ever be closed (Hill, 1997). The purpose is then identified in providing a model of assessment of the gap over time, registering temporary narrowing or broadening trends, as well as the continued relationship between European means and goals (Ibid, 1997). The measurement of the CEG is itself the great byproduct of this model, and it attempts to give the European Union a *yardstick* (Hill, 1997) via which to calculate and when needed re-caliber its aim in formulating and enforcing external action.

However, certain issues have been identified over time when discussing the CEG, and while not disruptive of the entire model, they are to be considered and registered. Nielsen for example underscores the risks associated with creating false possibilities both of the EU as well as beyond its borders for external partners and third countries (2013). Below it is seen how external players may, and have already, attempt to capitalise on this to bash European credibility. Another fear is associated with the contrast that is likely to arise in public perception. The latter may attribute to the EU a set of powers and achievable goals that are in fact beyond its reach (Ibid 2013). This point is tackled in this research via an interview analysis that stands to assess this very risk via the experience of the chosen sample. Furthermore, as stated by Hill already in his review of the CEG, the risk of over commitment and under fulfilment present a substantial threat to the model (1997). These damaging overstretches may be constructed while attempting to overcome the gap, as seen above, and have, to some extent, already been registered today. Hoffmann and Niemann are among others who add to this point, as well as to the overarching problematic relationship between capabilities and expectations, by stating the impossibility to interchange the EU actorness with its capacity to act coherently and effectively (2017).

Ultimately, to register the risks of CEG is to understand the structure and reach of the model. Most importantly though, its scope, as a measuring tool for EU foreign policy rather than as a concept to be overcome, proves as laudable today as it was throughout the 1990s. It is then positioned at the centre of this report, and will respectively be utilised as the yardstick for the evaluation of European soft power in countering hybrid threats in the EaP.

## CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Entertaining an evaluation of European foreign policy on such volatile matters of hybrid warfare is set to be a complex process. This is made all the more challenging when attempting to measure its scope in terms of soft power, a concept not-so-ironically described as *hard to use, easy to lose, and costly to reestablish* (Nye 2011). Mainly, the issues with both body of work resides in the difficulty to discern the true cost-to-benefit data, often obfuscated by external actors, like state or non-state players, or factors, like the economy or health and safety (Nielsen, 2013). All this is then to be tested against the will and priorities of a Union that is often slowed down by internal roadblocks, and the shifting political trends of its bureaucracy (Ekengren, 2018). Nonetheless, as the EU continues to invest in its global posture, and is increasingly called upon to do so in light of geopolitical events happening around it, a measurement of its capacity is not simply invited, but indeed required.

### 3.1 Why the CEG

While by no means the ultimate tool of assessment, the Capability-Expectations Gap (CEG), offered by Hill (1993) and utilised over the last thirty years by others (Nielsen, 2013; Yilmaz-Elmas, 2020), is uniquely set up for an exploration of European foreign policy. as discussed above, the theory itself was crafted specifically for the investigation of the European Union's specific structure, and its unusual external posture. It is thus utilised in this report as a tool for the measurement of the Union's expectations, meaning its goals and ambitions in countering hybrid threats in the Eastern Partnership (EaP), and its capabilities, identified as the vast set of soft power tools currently available to the its agencies and partners.

Hill himself introduced and studied the CEG within the traditional framework of assessing the role of European power in foreign affairs (Hill,1993). Others, including Nielsen, expanded the topic to the rising role of soft power in foreign affairs within European institutional and security frameworks, focusing on the founding of the European External Action Service (EEAS)<sup>1</sup> and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (Nielsen, 2013). Finally, the CEG was even brough beyond Europe's geography, when Chen and Gao attempted to utilise CEG to measure European security strategies towards Asia. Both observe a notable rise in EU efforts to expand its programmes and goals in the region (2020). However, they also insist on a substantial lack of improvements in the security framework due to what they define as internal and external constrains, circling back to the over-ambitious steps of the EU vis a vis its capacity to act on those goals (Ibid, 2020). This functions as a great example of how the CEG can be utilised for the measurement of EU foreign affairs, either by focusing on a specific policy (Nielsen, 2013) as well as for a broader strategy (Chen et al., 2020).

### 3.2 Operationalisation of CEG in the EaP

*“The successful Europeanisation of the Eastern Partnership area cannot be anything but*

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<sup>1</sup> Council of the EU. (2010). Council Decision 2010/427/EU of 26 July 2010 Establishing the Organisation and Functioning of the European External Action Service. Retrieved on July 15, 2021 from: Council Decision of 26 July 2010 establishing the organisation and functioning of the European External Action Service (europa.eu).

*a dynamic process, marked with unexpected breakthroughs and setbacks.”*

Quote from Darchiashvili, D., & Bakradze, D.  
“The EU eastern partnership initiative and Georgia.” (2019).

Similarly to the work of those previous authors, this research utilises the Capability-Expectations Gap to discern an assessment of the overall trends of a contemporary strategy in light of its instruments, based on a case(s) study. There the first element is identified as the European strategies and goals for the countering of HT, representative of the expectations; while the second being the means and instruments of soft power available to the EU for the achievement of those goals, hence considered as the capabilities. Finally, the gap between the two is observed across the variety of case studies of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, offered by the Eastern Partnership over time since its establishment in 2009 (Gahler, 2021). The context of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) has been chosen for a variety of reasons.

Firstly, geopolitically speaking, the increased relevance of the Eastern flank is indisputably moving much of the conversation of European foreign policy towards it. Starting with the Russian war in Georgia of 2008, the informal annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the later invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2022, the region is once again under the lens of international security and defence in such a way unseen since the fall of the USSR (Kaldor, 2021). Already in 2015 many were theorising the major security challenges awaiting for the EU on its Eastern flank (Shelest, 2015), highlighting that the security architecture constructed by the Euro-Atlantic partners was being challenged by external actors, first of which Russia (Darchiashvili et al., 2019). In this regard, where the traditional military might of organisations and players like NATO and the US was bound to be limited in scope, new actors such as the EU presented a potentially valuable alternative to these cross-border challenges (Ibid, 2019).

Secondly, feeding off the previous point, the unconventional nature of these dynamics, increasingly shaped by hybrid warfare and cross-sectoral coercions, raised the stake and changed the framework of what was conventionally identified with partnerships in the field of defence and security (Shelest, 2015; Darchiashvili et al., 2019). Especially in the Eastern flank the post-2014 environment has been increasingly shaped by these techniques, spread by state centric actors which in time relegated the more traditionally irregular actors to the tactical dimension (Mumford, & Carlucci, 2023). This has meant a severe expansion in what were before the relatively limited resources and reach of hybrid actors due to the backing offered by larger polities such as Russia in Georgia since 2008 (Gogolashvili et al, 2019). Consequently it is no coincidence that as of writing, many of the countries of the Eastern Partnership are primary targets of hybrid tactics and unconventional warfare (Ratsyborinska, 2021), unfortunately proving to be excellent samples for this report.

Thirdly, the work of the European Union in advancing its ties with the Eastern European countries beyond its borders offers a powerful case for its soft power approach. The EaP, established in 2009 with the countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, has been attempting to deepen cooperation and partnership in the name of economic, political, and social development (Gahler, 2021). The initiative offers these countries opportunities based on four main pillars of democracy and good governance; economic integration; energy security; and contract between people (Darchiashvili, 2019). Between successes (Gogolashvili, 2019) and setbacks (Darchiashvili, 2019), the soft power nature of these relationships is impossible to go unnoticed, presenting a particularly deserving case of its usage in wider EU foreign policy (Olech, 2021).

Ultimately, whereas the hybrid environment of these actions, along with the complexities of understanding the nature of the EU’s partnership with EaP countries, the CEG provides a framework of reference for the measurement of

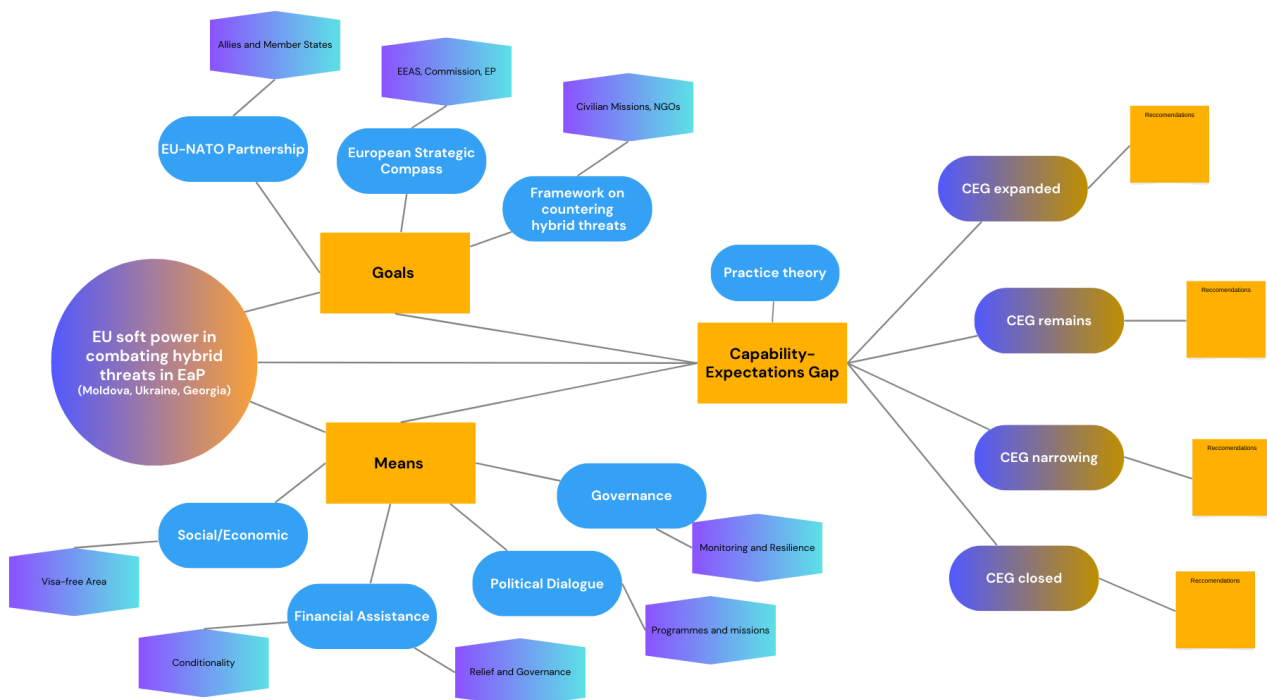
this research’s objectives. Within this case of the EaP, CEG is utilised to gather all available data on both the goals and means of European soft power in combating HTs , and then assessing the gap that may appear therein.

### 3.3 Expected Outcomes

The results that emerge by the application of CEG to this research are likely to be extensive and of a broad scope. The intended outcome is that of assessing the overarching trends of combating hybrid threats with soft power in the EaP over time, as it attempts at gathering as much relevant data as possible. While it remains inconceivable for the scope of this report to access all of it, the quantity, and most notably, the quality of the sample is sufficient for the elaboration of the research’s objectives. The resulting product is set to produce the following evidence. Firstly, a comprehensive overview of both bodies of work, meaning hybrid threats and soft power, within the case study of the EaP. Secondly, an approximative representation of the contemporary gap that stands between them, represented by one of the four models identified. And lastly, a genuine list of context- and data- driven recommendations for the overcoming of the gap, based on the models of understanding that result from the research.

Refer to Figure 1 for an overview operationalisation of CEG.

Figure 1



#### 3.3.1 The four models

As highlighted by Figure 1, testing the goals and means of our case within the CEG is likely to produce recommendations based on four different models that may emerge.

The four attempt to represent all potential outcomes of this theoretical framework, and are based on the assumption that the CEG is inversely proportional to the role of European Soft power in countering hybrid threats in the EaP. This

suggests that the more efficient the role of the latter is, the narrower the gap becomes, and vice versa. The time frame within which the gap's trends are analysed remains that between the EaP's establishment in 2009 and May 2024. Accordingly the models are presented.

The first scenario is that of a CEG which has expanded. This model represents a situation in which European tools and means of soft power have not managed to meet most, if any, of its wider goals in combating HT in the EaP. This might be due to various factors, spacing from EU inefficiencies in delivering on its promises; implementing the right tools; keeping up with ever changing nature of hybrid warfare (Stefan, 2023); and/or internal/external factors at play in its bureaucratic machinery. Examples from the latter case may include legislative inconsistencies and lack of political will on the part of the European and national bureaucracies (Hill, 1997), as well as due to very own environment of the EaP country under consideration. This would result in a scenario where the gap has expanded, indicating the inability of the current framework of capabilities to ever deliver on its expectations. Recommendations for this model would likely suggest the necessity to attempt at overcoming the gap accordingly to one, or both, of Hill's recommendations. Either by substantially expanding the capabilities (1993), and hence the toolbox of the European soft power (Nielsen, 2013), or by significantly reducing the expectations (Ibid, 1993), meaning re-framing the goals and objectives of the EU in countering hybrid threats in the EaP. A combination of both recommendations may also prove beneficial.

The second model is that of a CEG which remains. This offers a situation in which despite indisputable changes in both means and goals, the gap has remained relatively similar to its 2009 form. Such a result might be due to various factors, largely conforming to the ones offered in the previous case. An especially notable motive could be identified in the over mentioned nature of hybrid warfare. In that even whereas the EU efforts be proven effective to tackle hybrid tactics expressed at the time, newer threats of hybrid warfare may still prove capable of spreading across the EaP via uncharted channels not yet tackled by the EU soft power tools (Olech, 2021). This therefore results in a scenario where the gap constantly remains of the same depth, once again suggesting that overcoming the gap may be attempted following one or the combination of both recommendations offered by Hill and Nielsen (1993; 2013). However, given that between 2009 and today there have been countless attempts to expand European soft power tools, one might find the *reducing of the expectations* to be a more potentially beneficial approach to consider.

Thirdly, this model represents a CEG that has narrowed. Oppositely to the first one, this scenario considers a situation where the objectives of the EU in countering HT and the means of soft power via which to achieve them have been converging, hence narrowing the gap. This may be due to a number of factors spacing from effective implementation of EU soft power tools in the EaP; profitable cooperation with EaP national governments (Stefan, 2023); reduced efforts of state and non state actors to spread HT; increased will of EU bureaucracy to act or reduce its objectives in the EaP. This models would therefore highlight a positive development in the usage of soft power tools for countering hybrid threats in the EaP. Consequently, recommendations for the future may not necessarily suggest the considering of neither approach offered by Hill (1993), as the current framework would prove workable as is. Nonetheless, an assessment of what could be adjusted and optimised by further reducing the goals or expanding the means may still prove beneficial, as long as it does not threaten the continued results offered by the current framework.

Fourth, and last, this model considers a CEG that has been closed. This offers a scenario where the efforts of European soft power have proved more than efficient, resulting in the complete closure of the gap itself, and hence delivering on all the goals envisioned by the EU in combating hybrid threats. Once again this may be due to various factors, largely mentioned above already. This would ultimately offer very little recommendations moving forward, as both approaches on overcoming the gap be made useless by very fact that the CEG has been overcome already.



Nonetheless, as observed by Hill already, the complete closure of the CEG is nearly impossible (1997), due to basic human tendencies of divergence between expectations and capabilities. Within our case, the divergence is easily identified by the continued liability that HTs remain for all EaP countries (Ratsyborinska, 2022), as well as the well assessed limitations of European soft power (Nielsen, 2013). Beyond the legitimacy of these observations, the research includes such a model for sake of circularity and consistency in the exploration of the concept.

Ultimately, the expected outcomes of this research, available for assessment via the theoretical framework of the CEG, are likely to provide substantial evidence to the case for European soft power in combating HTs in the EaP. The results may highlight a specific model for the elaboration of recommendations, yet highly influenced by the degree of the model itself. For example, whereas the evidence represents the narrowing of the gap, offered by the third scenario, the degree to which the latter has narrowed would be critical in calculating what recommendations be given.

## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Research Design

The research design of this report rests on the investigation of its three research sub-questions. The first two provide an understanding of the means (capabilities) and the goals (expectations) of EU soft power comparing hybrid threats in EaP. This is assessed within the cases of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia. The final sub-question then attempts to merge the previous and discuss the current state of the Capability-Expectations Gap (CEG), based on which different recommendations follow. Refer to Table 1 for an overview of the method of analysis.

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Research Question</i>	<i>Research Objective</i>	<i>Measure</i>	<i>Data Sources</i>
<b><i>Soft power tools</i></b>	<i>How can EU soft power means and tools counter hybrid threats in the EaP countries of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia?</i>	To understand the available instruments for countering the threat in EaP countries via soft power	Uncertainty behind the functionality of such tools in fighting hybrid threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Literature</li> <li>- (Non-) Government reports/ programmes</li> <li>- EU toolbox</li> <li>- Interviews</li> </ul>
<b><i>European goals against hybrid threats</i></b>	<i>To what extent are wider EU security strategic goals in combating hybrid threats met in those EaP countries?</i>	To understand the extent to which wider goals have been achieved and/ or are achievable within the current framework	Difficulty to declare European goals as met or ongoing in the EaP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Literature</li> <li>- (Non-) Government reports and joint communications</li> <li>- EU legislations and strategies report</li> <li>- Interviews</li> </ul>
<b><i>Capability-Expectation gap CEG</i></b>	<i>How are these findings suggestive of European capabilities to achieve its security goals in the EaP?</i>	To understand the current framework within which the EU attempts to meet such goals, and investigate the potential necessity for changes to be applied	Inconsistency in European CEG developments that create uncertainty in the achievability of EU's objectives vis a vis its instruments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Literature</li> <li>- Interviews</li> <li>- Data sets</li> <li>- EU toolbox</li> <li>- EU reports</li> </ul>

Table 1

As per the first sub-question [*How can EU soft power means and tools counter hybrid threats in the EaP countries of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia?*], definitions over the role of soft power in foreign policy and hybrid threats are discussed. Consequently, an exploration of the practical efforts of (non-) state and supranational entities follows. This players include EU agencies like the EEAS and civilian missions, national governments of the case studies, and NGOs. Moreover, the report presents and discusses the instruments deployable by these actors to combat hybrid threats, as set out by the EU Hybrid Toolbox EUHT (Clingendael Institute. 2022). This provides the research with an understanding of the presence of EU-backed soft power entities in the region. Measurable tools are investigated and listed through an extensive analysis of the work undertaken by such agencies in terms of capabilities resilience, strategic communication, cultural diplomacy, and economic partnerships (Stafford, 2019). This is achieved via an

analysis of contemporary academic reports, and interviews with expert and officials at the EU level. Practice theory occupies an important role in this section for the understanding of what Bicci and Bremberg define as *socially meaningful patterns of action* (2016). Through these a deeper analysis over the operationalisation and functionality of these tools within the cases is achievable.

The second sub-question [*To what extent are wider EU security strategic goals in combating hybrid threats met in those EaP countries?*] is set to explore the outcomes of such programmes in the EaP vis a vis European wider goals. The latter are explored via a document analysis of major EU and National legislations and reports such as the European Security Strategy (Solana, 2003); the Strategic compass of the European Union (2022); the EU NATO Partnership of Security for Eastern and Southern Europe (European Neighbourhood); and the Joint framework on countering hybrid threats (European Commission. 2016b). Moreover, interviews conducted with citizens of the case study countries of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine are also inserted into the section to fill the commonly understated vacuum between recorded efforts and the realities the ground. This interview analysis considers their first hand experience as a relevant factor in answering the sub-questions, understanding that concepts of *awareness* and *public perceptions* play a vital role in the furthering of strategic goals in the EaP (Stefan, 2023).

The third sub-question [*How are these findings suggestive of European capabilities to achieve its security goals in the EaP ?*] offers to merge the results of the previous two for a comprehensive elaboration on their findings. The purpose is to identify the gap between the goals of EU security frameworks and its respective toolbox (Hill. 1993). Answering this question allows the research to identify whether EU soft power (represented by its tools) satisfies the expectations positioned upon it by wider anti-hybrid threats goals in the EaP. Depending on the results over such feasibility, alternative recommendations are offered.

Once these three sub-questions are answered, it will be made possible to explore the main research question and understand the extent to which EU soft power can effectively counter hybrid threats and meet its security objectives in the EaP.

## 4.2 Case Selection: Hybrid threats in Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia

The case selection for this research looks at the EaP countries of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia. These have been chosen as representative of the wider EaP for the following reasons. All three nations are currently being targeted by (non-)state actors with hybrid threats spacing from disinformation, terrorism, and unconventional warfare (Ratsyborinska, 2021). Moreover, all three's territorial integrity is under threat from either direct Russian occupancy (Luhansk Oblast, Donetsk Oblast and parts of Zaporizhzhia Oblast and Crimea in Ukraine; South Ossetia in Georgia) or indirect occupancy (Transnistria in Moldova; Abkhazia in Georgia) (Kaunert, de Deus Pereira, 2023). However, all of their populations are also largely positive of the EU and have taken steps over time to become closer to the Union (Gahler, 2021). Most recently, in December 2023, they have also been offered EU candidate status (European Commission, 2023). Despite various setbacks from local governments, and some dramatic developments, including the currently unfolding war in Ukraine, these countries offer a notable case selection for this report. Moreover, hybrid attacks (HT) in these EaP nations have largely been associated with attempts to weaken their European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations (Gogolashvili et al., 2019), which only reinforces that investigating the role of soft power in

countering HT represents a strategically vital area of research. Undeniably, as Table 2<sup>2</sup> shows, hybrid tactics in the three countries of this case study are almost identical, suggesting that a common approach against them is warranted.

Table 2

**Table. Objectives of the Russian hybrid strategy for EaP countries**

	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Belarus	Georgia	Moldova	Ukraine
<b>Hybrid Threat Objective</b>						
Weakening of State Institutions						
Weakening Democracy						
Weakening Defense Capacity						
Questioning EU values						
Reducing Support to EU Integration						
Opposing Euro-Atlantic Integration						
Corrupting government and politicians						
Influencing elections						
Weakening national identity						
Strengthening pro-Russian sentiments						
Destabilization						
Political polarization						
Affecting critical infrastructure						
Trade diversion						
Justification of occupation						
Affecting economy						
Supporting separatism and protracted conflicts						

While acknowledging the vast differences amongst Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, along with the necessities to develop country specific solutions and tailored-made strategies, it is still advantageous to consider wider cooperation (with the EU) against hybrid threats. In this regard the EU offers two appealable approaches. The first is that of guaranteeing each of them

a direct channel of support from 27 Member States (MS) and Brussels; and secondly to encourage and facilitate the construction of reciprocally beneficial anti-HT systems amongst the three of them (Ibid, 2019).

On the other hand, a few disclaimers are considered as to the reasons behind the exclusion of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus. Firstly, from a logistical standpoint, it would be quite challenging to address the specific situations of all six EaP nations. Secondly, as soft power remains heavily linked to values and norms, its influence is substantially decreased in countries where governments and/or populations do not share them (Nielsen, 2013). Belarus remains as a largely disassociated country from the EU and has repeatedly shown little evidence to the influence that EU soft power can/has had there (Gahler, 2021). Azerbaijan also showcases a low percentage of positive perceptions over the EU, stuck at 44% (EU Neighbours 2020). Armenia remains sitting on the fence and despite some economic programmes, still refused to join the Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) due to its membership to the Russian-backed Eurasian Economic Union agreement (EPRS 2020).

### 4.3 Data Collection

This research is undertaken as a qualitative study, as it aims to provide and account for various academic perspectives and multi-sectors considerations in the field of geopolitics, economics, law, and society (Yin, 2014). This is due the fact that such investigation requires an in-depth understanding of the various factors at play in the domain of security in the EaP, despite the focus being on the EU and its soft power. Moreover the qualitative approach is often encouraged when attempting to explore a phenomena (within its own environment) based on the foundation of theory,

<sup>2</sup>Gogolashvili, Paşa, Hovhannisyanyan, Ohiienko et al., (2019). Countering Hybrid Threats: Stronger Role for Civil Society in post-2020 EaP Roadmap. 2019.

as it is in this case with CEG (Yildirim & Simsek, 2018). Ultimately, a document and an interview analysis are respectively utilised throughout this research in accordance with most qualitative studies (Yildiz, 2020). Consequently the data collection is structured in the following way.

With regard to the first subquestion, focused on “What tools” and “How they work”, interview structure is proposed for the elaboration of those tools and means via which the goals and means of soft power of the EU can be assessed in the region (Van Thiel, 2014). These are especially valuable to investigate the activities and projects of EU’s agencies in the region. As per the second sub question, which aims to answer questions of “Which goals”, the research utilises an archival and document analysis (Yin, 2014). Thirdly, the last subquestion utilises the analysis of the previous too as building blocs of its own assessment over the CEG. This is done to factor in the many trends and variables that might allow this study to draw conclusions on the positive or negative assessment of soft power approach in the security context of the EU.

### 4.3.1 Document Analysis

This report attempts to investigate programmes and initiatives vis a vis goals and objectives over time in a specific geographical area. The many variables at play consistently highlight the difficulties in gathering all available data, challenging the capabilities of this research to consider all factors at play. Nonetheless, whereas specific features and instances may be missing, wider trends and developments over time remain observable and calculable, as per the objectives of this investigation. To that end, a document and archival analysis is carried out.

This kind of method offers various advantages for the data collection.

Firstly, it allows for the gathering of evidence coming from both public records and personal documents sources (Merriam, 2013), spacing from official statements and policies at the EU level, to the academic work of authors who had first hand experience in the context. The latter remains as the key word for this second point too. *Context* and setting is in fact fundamental for any successful qualitative document analysis, as the phenomena observed must be studied within its own environment (Creswell, 2015). In this case, the setting of the EaP countries is instrumental in understanding the validity of EU goals against HT, and the effectiveness (both factual and perceived) of their tools and means. Hence, the work of many Eastern European authors is utilised, to fill the East-West divide and consider as many different perspectives as possible. Thirdly, the information and findings found in the documents are then gathered as evidence via a descriptive analysis (Yildirim & Simsek, 2018), prioritising the data recovered from subject-matter experts and peer-review sources for authenticity (Yildiz, 2020).

### 4.3.2 Interview analysis

As stated above, this report is interested in understanding all relevant factors to soft power in the EaP, which to some extent, include features of perceptions and public opinion. For the following reasons, an interview method is also utilised for this qualitative study. There is a dual purpose for this. On the one hand, interviews have been carried out with experts at the EU and academic level. This is done to compliment the document analysis as well as in the attempt to explore the personal opinions of those who actively contribute to the ongoing debates on either European soft power or hybrid threats. On the other, the method offers interviews with citizens of the EaP sample countries to investigate their personal perceptions as Moldovans, Ukrainians, and Georgians. This is done to promote first hand experience over knowledge on the subject.

Altogether the interview format aims at merging the two areas in a data set capable of cohesively calculating the true impact of hybrid threats and soft power in the EaP over time.

#### 4.3.2.1 Interview Sample

The expectation for such interview structure is to guarantee that a plethora of informed voices are considered from both the academic and the bureaucratic fields. Three main types of samples have been considered for this analysis: scholars from research institutes and universities; officials from EU agencies; and citizens of EaP countries (Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova). Their perspectives are considered both within each group, as well as altogether, to identify wider trends of similarities and differences.

See Table 3 for an overview of the interviewees.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Group</i>
Keir Giles	Senior Consulting Fellow of Russia and Eurasia programme. Chatham House.
Daniel Fiott	Head of Defence and Statecraft programme at the centre for security, diplomacy, and strategy. VUB.
Torben Fell	Policy Officer EEAS division on hybrid threats. EEAS.
Mircea Nicolae Nanca	EEAS Strategic communication officer. EEAS.
Viktoriiia Kulyniak	Citizen of Ukraine
Teodora Drucec	Citizen of Moldova
Laura Iatisin	Citizen of Moldova
Avtandil Svianadze	Citizen of Georgia
Valeria Donets	Citizen of Ukraine
Vlada Sanduleac	Citizen of Moldova
Alex Natradze	Citizen of Georgia

Table 3

As visible in table 3, a substantial amount of interviewees have been selected on the basis of their nationality. The decision to do so is due to the personal experience and on-the-ground perspective that those can bring to the discussion. Differently, while much appreciated, the opinion of the other interviewees could also be represented by the variety of documents and academic reports available online. Therefore, the opportunity to include evidence from personal conversations with citizens of the case studies countries is valuable to the report's objectives and adds to the

significance of the study. The EaP citizens' sample is constituted by nationals between 18-32 years of age, who grew up on the territory. Their vicinity to hybrid threats or prior knowledge on the subject was not a requirement, as to accumulate genuine data on what can be seen as the average citizen of country-x.

#### *4.3.2.2 Interview Format*

The format of these interviews follows a semi-structured script, in which the subjects are invited to comment on the three bodies of work presented above: soft power perspectives; hybrid threats awareness; dealing with the CEG. Ultimately, the conversation invites for a reflection on future recommendations and the way forward.

The interview structure is subdivided into 6 parts (7 questions including an introduction). Each part is composed of a main question, broadly structured, accompanied by at least one follow-up that zooms into specifics. Based on the background of each interviewee the follow-up question may change or be phrased differently, as to accommodate them. Refer to Table 4 for a rundown of the interview questions.

<i>Parts</i>	<i>Main Q.</i>	<i>Follow up (s)</i>	<i>Notes</i>
<b>1. Soft Power</b>	What is your view on the concept of Soft power and more specifically of EU soft power?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Which soft power tools you think are most efficient when implementing EU policy?</li> <li>- Should the EU and the national governments of EaP invest more in soft power instruments?</li> </ul>	Pretext to this question offers a definition of soft power.
<b>2. Hybrid threats</b>	How do you perceive the significance of hybrid threats in contemporary contexts?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How about situation-specific instances in Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia? Are there</li> <li>- Who are the main actors and targets? How can HT be observed?</li> </ul>	Pretext to this question offers a definition of hybrid threats.
<b>3. Goals (Exp.)</b>	What is your perspective on the viability of European wider security goals for the EaP?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Can some progress be observed already? And what does that tell you about the way forward?</li> </ul>	Pretext to this question offers an overview of the wider EU security goals against hybrid threats.
<b>4. Means (Cap.)</b>	Do you believe in the capacity of EU/National programmes and efforts to counter hybrid threats?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If so, which programmes are most effective to counter which hybrid threats?</li> </ul>	
<b>5. The Gap</b>	What is your view on the CEG today?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How is utilising soft power tools to counter hybrid threats in the EaP indicative of the development in the CEG?</li> <li>- Would you subscribe to any of the 4 models suggested by the research.</li> </ul>	Pretext to this question offers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Definition of the CEG</li> <li>- The four models:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Gap remains the same</i></li> <li>- <i>Gap is expanding</i></li> <li>- <i>Gap is narrowing</i></li> <li>- <i>Gap is closed</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>6. The way forward</b>	Based on your responses, what recommendations would you offer to move forward?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What changes should be made with regard to the means (capabilities) and/or the goals (expectations) that the EU holds for the EaP?</li> </ul>	Pretext to this question offers two broad options to (1) expand means to meet projected goals, or (2) reduce goals to make them more viable.

Table 4

#### 4.3.2.3 Coding Tree

The findings of this interview analysis are gathered in a data set which strikes for the following goals. Firstly, to collect enough perspectives on the three main bodies of work, spacing from theory-specific knowledge to public perceptions. Secondly, to highlight similarities and differences within each of the three groups of individuals. Thirdly, to identify wider trends amongst individuals of different groups, which may be suggestive of overall perceptions of each body of work. Fourth, and lastly, to elaborate on potential recommendations based on their perspectives on the three



body of work. This last point is especially delicate as it attempts to understand and analyse an individual's preferred recommendations by building on their background and perceptions of the case study.

See Figure 2 an overview of the coding tree utilised.

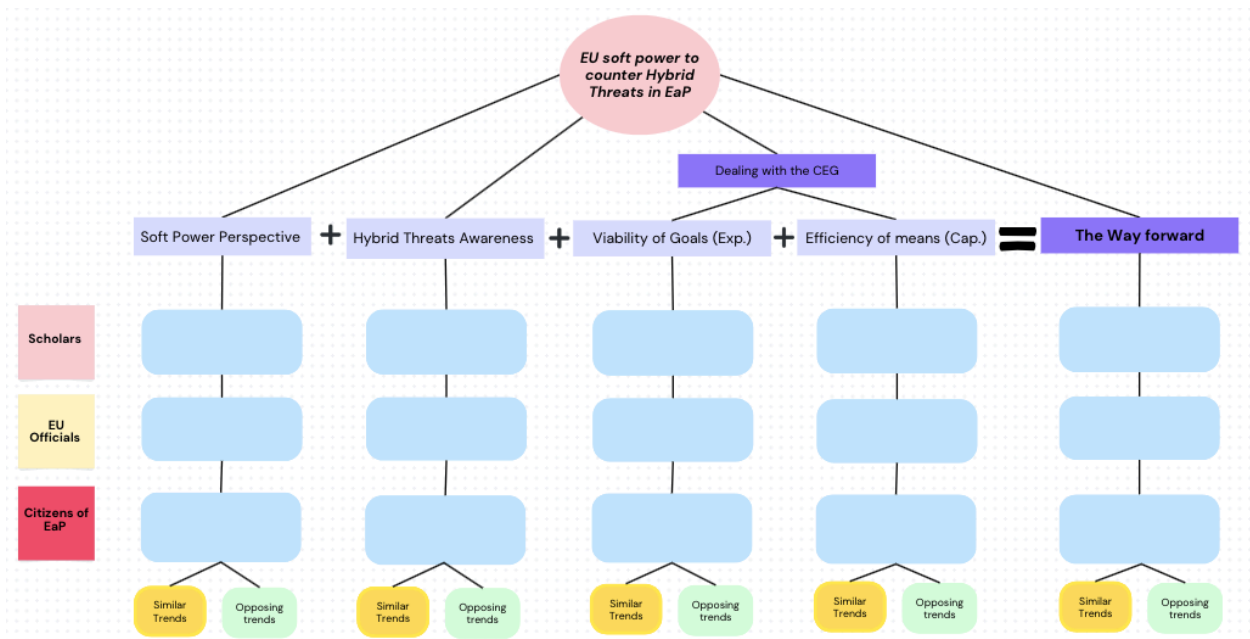


Figure 2

## CHAPTER 5: POWER AND SECURITY

The role that the European Union has been trying to achieve for itself on the continent's stage, as well as globally, is surely an ambitious one. The EU attempts to present its *actorness* around the world as a value- and norms-based Union capable of carrying out a long list of endeavours (Landaburu, 2006). These space from that of regional pacifier (Sjursen, 2002), mediator of conflict (Nielsen, 2013), and global intervener, altogether capable of military intervention without ever crossing the line drawn by international law (Running, 2003). This is carried out on a multitude of levels by strategies, policies, and missions. In the field of security and defence, the EU follows the guidelines imposed upon itself by strategies and documents such as the Strategic Compass<sup>3</sup>; the EU roadmap<sup>4</sup>; and the EU global security strategy<sup>5</sup>. These have drawn up many enduring policies like the Common Foreign and Security Policy CFSP and the Common Security and Defence Policy CSPD; which in terms gave life, via the European Council, to agencies such as the European External Action Service<sup>6</sup> (EEAS) and many civilian (and military) missions.

### 5.1 European Power

*“Diplomats help state to surrender the bits of their authority that need to be surrendered if we are to transition to a system that has more chance of survival.”*

Quote from Tom Fletcher,  
“The naked diplomat” (2017).

This process of shifting and permuting more authorities to Brussels that have traditionally belonged to the nation states is a complex one, but not inexplicable. Despite its setbacks, larger bureaucracies and agencies, EU included, perform consistently well in the eyes of most states, and incentivise loyalty in the latter (Darchiashvili et al., 2019). Consequently, that loyalty often pushes for the gradual transfer of authority and power, especially over matters where the nation state's single voice is not likely to be as strong otherwise (Haas, 2018). The survival of the state itself requires this procedure to gradually take place, also furthered by diplomacy and the bureaucratic machinery (Fletcher, 2017).

Especially in the field of security, this is further smoothed by common external factors such as collective threats and crisis, of either the soft domain, like social stability issues (Kuus, 2003), or the hard one, such as the war in Ukraine. The expansion of these becomes even more warranted once one realises the constant flux between hard and

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<sup>3</sup> Council of the European Union (2022). A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence - For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security.

<sup>4</sup> Brussels, 9.6.2017 SWD (2017) 300 final JOINT STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT Eastern Partnership - 20 Deliverables for 2020 Focusing on key priorities and tangible results. Available from: [www.ec.europa.eu/neighbourhoodenlargement/sites/near/files/eap\\_20\\_deliverables\\_for\\_2020.pdf](http://www.ec.europa.eu/neighbourhoodenlargement/sites/near/files/eap_20_deliverables_for_2020.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> EU Global Security Strategy. p 25. Available from: [www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Council of the EU. (2010). Council Decision 2010/427/EU of 26 July 2010 Establishing the Organisation and Functioning of the European External Action Service. Retrieved on July 15, 2021 from: Council Decision of 26 July 2010 establishing the organisation and functioning of the European External Action Service (europa.eu).

soft security domains, to which hard and soft power frameworks correspond (Kaldor, 2016). This means that what can be considered to be within one domain, as energy was pushed into the soft domain of security (Ibid, 2016), could shift into the the other, as it now seems likely with energy in light of Russian energetic coercion (Gogolashvili, et al., 2019).

Therefore arises an issue of goals and adequate means. In light of this fluctuation one might ask what kind of power should an actor utilise to tackle a challenge in a certain domain. The common response might choose to employ *hard* power tools to tackle issues that are positioned in the *hard* domain; however, due to the fluctuation, the dynamic is likely to shift, causing an issue of legitimacy. This is especially apparent when considering the hybrid nature of unconventional threats, which strategically encompasses elements from different domains (Darchiashvili et al., 2019). It is in fact no coincidence that the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation himself, General Valery Gerasimov, highlighted already in 2013 the importance of understanding modern warfare as *non-linear*, containing a mixture of political goals to be achieved via military means, and vice versa (Герасимов, 2013). Hence, it becomes fair to assume that a combination of both soft and hard power tools are more likely to successfully enforce policy and goals. This supports the idea that in contemporary security and defence frameworks, including the EaP and CFSP altogether, the *actorness* of the EU must assume a dimension of power that accounts for both its soft and hard spheres, granting it authority over both domains of security too.

Thus far the European Union has proven to be relatively incapable, or at least unwilling to develop a unitary, supranational, hard power posture. The military dimension unmistakably remains as the least remarkable area of EU foreign policy (Nielsen, 2013) despite its seemingly efforts throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Lachowski, 2002). Its current hard toolbox contains largely economic instruments, spreading from sanctions to conditionality measures. However even these are often interpreted as softer, or lower, levels of European hard power (Nielsen, 2013). While largely positive tools of reinforcing EU hegemony over the continent, even these do not elevate the Union to the hard power posture, nor to the normative one, it professes for itself (Hyde-Price, 2006). The role that the EU wants to have in geopolitics, that of a stabiliser, a mediator, and most importantly an intervener (Howorth 2007; Matlary 2006; Rynning 2003), is found to be ill-suited by its leadership, largely due to its vast bureaucratic regime, when confronting adversaries that use forms of hard power (Matlary, 2018). However, these conclusions are considered by studies that solely account for a review of European hard power, which continue to see it as somewhat separated from the overall power that one polity yields (Howorth 2007; Matlary 2006; Rynning 2003). Nonetheless, remembering the non-linearity feature offered by General Gerasimov, one cannot understand (European) power if not by investigating all its different domains, and the fluctuations between them. This suggests that wherever EU's hard power is weaker, that may precisely be where other forms, including normative, civilian, and soft, could be most effective (Gray 2011).

### 5.1.1 European Soft Power

*“Soft power is hard to use, easy to lose, and costly to reestablish”*

Quote from Joseph Nye. 2011

Former DG RELEX Commissioner Ferrero-Walder argued the EU's principal source of power to be of a soft nature rather than hard, adding that the former is unique, different from others, and constitutes the special trait of the

Union (2006a)<sup>7</sup>. Behind the disputed cultural trait of it, soft power is often referred back to what the EU has and how it uses it to reach its goals abroad (Tulmets, 2007). This is based on two major elements of *ideology* (and values), and *attractiveness* (Nielsen, 2013). The first one, often attached to ideals of democracy and human rights, is taken by this report with utmost delicacy. This is due to the normative nature of the term, which, as discussed in Chapter 2, concerns what the EU is/wants to be instead of what this research considers, being what the EU does (Manners, 2002). Values and ideology remain central to the discussion on European soft power, also featured extensively throughout all major EU strategies and policy statements, including the 2004 ENP strategy paper (Nielsen, 2013) but are not considered as elements per se; rather they are seen as connotations of the other, attractiveness (Nye, 2004).

Attractiveness functions as the true engine of European soft power, encapsulating its rationale behind its goals and means of action. The means include the narrative of the EU as peaceful integration; the elevation of the rule of law as a common framework and necessary step; the appeal of its single market and Schengen Zone; and ultimately its enlargement policy (Nielsen, 2013). The attraction of common values is surely present, but it is ultimately the more tangible results that appeal to the recipients, highlighted by the economic side of EU hegemony (Delcour & Tulmets, 2007). Contractual relationships, financial incentives, and trade ties are just some of the generous development that make EU soft power popular (Ibid, 200), and that in terms can be weaponised, via conditionality and sanctions, where the partnership be threatened. These suggests that soft power is ultimately seen as an asset, a set of tools for the implementation of policy and the satisfaction of wider goals (Nielsen, 2013). Following this logic, the very existence of programmes and policies like the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) can be seen as means of soft power (Runner, 2008). All these have proven relatively effective tools for the expansion of EU interests and goals, making the Union a leading figure globally over a number of areas including climate change, global development, and international law (Landaburu, 2006). This highlights that, despite its competitors may engage in hard power dynamics, European power, whereas more soft- than hard- oriented, continues to prove sufficiently relevant. However, while having understood the necessity to balance elements of both domains, along with the non-linearity of the security framework, the EU capacity to bolster its hard power has remained limited. This constitutes an issue as the expansion of the latter could cause soft power to expand too, for instance when in pursue of certain peacemaking and humanitarian interventions (Matlary, 2006).

More generally, as much of it revolves around its attractiveness, the challenge for European soft power is intrinsic to its capacity to deliver tangible policies and commitments over its rhetoric. Without concrete reinforcements, its attractiveness fades. (Nielsen, 2013). Already in Chapter 2 the concept of civilian power was assessed, presumed to be a source of soft power capable of expanding the EU international legitimacy. This remains as true today as it was in the 80s when the concept was spreading in popularity (Bull, 1982). However, its functionality only works when the emphasis is on the goals, and not just on the means, characterising one of the motives behind the perceived limited scope of European soft power. The vagueness of wider EU goals of conflict mediation and global intervention showcases just how fragile soft power can be (ibid 2013), as it remains too close to its counterpart to function on its own. Mutual bolstering therefore seems to be the way forward to ensure that the right emphasis is put upon legitimate tangible goals, backed by the attractiveness that European soft power yields. Examples of this differ based on geographical areas too. Wherever the EU has managed to stay truthful to its goals of economic policy agenda, security provision, and rule-based relations, soft power has worked effectively (Landaburu, 2006). The Western Balkans function as a good example of this since EU accession promises have proven well-intentioned (Jović, 2018). Differently, the 2014 EaP scenario offers the opposite. Back then, the EaP Vilnius summit received various blows due to

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<sup>7</sup> Ferrero-Waldner, B. (2006a). 'The EU in the World', speech at the European Policy Centre, Brussels, 2 February.

the refusal, under heaving Russian pressure, of Ukraine and Armenia to sign an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU. The incapacity of latter to back up with hard power those two countries inevitably resulted in a major setback, and an escalation of Russian interference, underlined by the lack of tangible protection beyond soft power means and promises (Nielsen & Vilson, 2014).

Ultimately, one realises that while soft and hard domains of European power can coexist, and indeed do, are nonetheless difficult to mix effectively. Hard power remains a more efficient element for the elaboration of legitimate strategies and goals, whereas soft power constitutes a set of tools and means that are increasingly effective in gaining partners and managing competitors (Nielsen, 2013). The challenge continues therefore to underline the balance between what both bring to the table, along with their respective capacity to tangibly act within a specific security frameworks.

## 5.2 Security Domain

*“One could indeed argue that security concerns have not contracted, but have expanded as security has been reconfigured into a “soft” societal stability issue”*

Quote from M. Kuus. *“Security in flux [..]”*. 2003.

The European security landscape has evolved through time in countless ways, making way to empires, Westphalian nation states, ideological blocs and international communities (Kissinger, 2015). The region has seen the rise of some of the largest armies and the bloodiest wars in contemporary history, from which reinforced necessities for coexistence and stability emerged in the late 1940s (Ibid 2015). While the first European Communities were established with economic cooperation in mind, the institutionalisation of it came out of a deeper necessity for European collective engagement and security (Grilli, 1993). Despite this, the latter remained largely fragmented and authorities over the policy field continued to rest within each nation states. On the one hand, this is due to deeply intrinsic demand for autonomy of each country upon its own defence and security. While on the other, the emergence of NATO as the dominant security force in Europe seemed to allow for a transfer of responsibility over the wider regional landscape (Howorth, 2004). Overtime, the European communities, then European Union, developed supranational authorities on a number of areas of the economy, rule of law, and even foreign affairs, maintaining nonetheless a relatively shy and intergovernmental posture on both defence and security (Norheim-Martinsen, 2010).

Today’s European security remains widely fragmented and volatile, made even more complex by the strategic competition amongst different regional and external actors (Stefan, 2023). Beyond the unjustified Russian aggression of Ukraine, and rising Chinese ambitions over the continent, other sources of uncertainty and conflict keep on shaking the faith of many Europeans who had grown accustomed to the perceived stability of the region (Ibid, 2023). The Eastern Flank remains as the protagonist of this, spacing from full out Russian militarism and territorial occupancy in the EaP, to Chinese economic coercion and diplomatic warfare in Lithuania and the balkans (Andrijauskas, 2023). Most dramatically, the unconventional methods of such strategies erode NATO’s capabilities to effectively shield (Eastern) Europe, while the EU security *actorness* in this multilateral system struggles to assert legitimacy of action (Stefan, 2023). As it often is, the economic sphere accounts for much of the motives behind these tensions. The Black Sea nations scramble for the maintenance of trade routes between Eurasian and the Mediterranean, with Russia and Turkey

at both choke points (Kaldor, 2021). Moreover, lawfare<sup>8</sup> is utilised to manipulate illegal economic and social practices (Klymenko, 2021), while Multi-Domain Operations (MDOs)<sup>9</sup> advance the technological toolboxes of security-enforcing weaponry (Stafford, 2019).

As discussed in Chapter 2, different languages and culture vary in their definitions of *security*, offering governments the chance to act well beyond the immediate necessities for peace (Габер, 2012; Shelest, 2022). Moreover, as unconventional tactics fathered the reach of foreign destabilising forces into economic and social spheres, what was viewed as a security-related issue has expanded over time (Darchiashvili et al., 2019). On the other hand though, it has been also argued that the very concept of security has grown out of solely military terms, and grown into an environment where it assumes responsibility over *softer societal stability and quality of life* (Kuus, 2003). This results in a game of overlapping policy areas where national governments and international organisations, including the EU and NATO, increasingly play their security strategies along the blurred lines of the economic and social arenas, spacing from the protection of Black Sea routes to the monitoring of democratic elections in the South Caucasus (Kaldor, 2021). Simultaneously, and feeding of each other, these trends have grown along with the developments of (c)overt methods of influencing, coercing, and pressuring partners and competitors over different policy fields, often justified in the name of the security maintenance (Kuus, 2003). These unconventional, policy overlapping techniques spread drastically throughout (Eastern) Europe and are widely regarded today as forms of hybrid warfare (Shelest, 2015).

However, as these negative trends suggest an increasingly gloomy scenario, they have also laid out expectations for the EU to become an asserting security provider (Darchiashvili et al., 2019). This can be supported by the capacity of the EU to act along the lines of these cross-sectoral challenges, whereas traditional entities of nation states and NATO, more suited for unidimensional hard power postures, seem to lack behind (Kaspars, 2022). Furthermore, as political instabilities and differentiated priorities within NATO become more apparent, European countries feel more compelled to take the reins over their own security landscape (Stafford, 2019).

### 5.2.1 Hybrid Threats

*“it is very likely that the major security challenge for the EU’s eastern neighbourhood Area in upcoming years will be how to respond to hybrid threats coming from Russia.”*

Quote from Shelest H.

*“Hybrid war & the Eastern Partnership [...]”*. 2015.

The phenomenon increasingly finds itself into the documents and reports of the EU and NATO over the security architecture of Europe. The EU Joint Communications on countering hybrid treats attempted at defining and elaborating on the concept in 2016 and 2018, while the European Strategic Compass of consistently referred to it since

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<sup>8</sup> *Lawfare is a term utilised to refer to strangers attempting to legitimise actions via warfare and hybrid tactics in light of international or national law*. See A. Klymenko, ‘The «War of Exercises» in the Black Sea: A New Very Dangerous Stage that Cannot Be Ignored’, BlackSeaNews, 30 August 2020. Retrieved 30 April 2021, <https://www.blackseanews.net/en/read/167556>.

<sup>9</sup> *MDO’s refer to a set of strategies focused on technological tools to counter the adversaries’s intelligence, reconnaissance, informational and unconventional warfare*. See Stafford, N. J. (2019). Alliance strikes back: using Multi Domain Operations to counter Russian hybrid warfare in the Baltics (Doctoral dissertation, Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College).

2021.<sup>10</sup> In 2016, the EU-NATO strategic partnership established in 2010 outlined combating hybrid threats as main areas of actions for regions of high tensions and conflict (Olech, 2021). The relevance of such a strategy is enhanced by its potentials, both in scope and means, of application in Eastern Europe and beyond; so much so that a multilevel approach to the countering of HT has grown to be accepted and required nowadays. Individuals countries, especially when directly targeted themselves, are less likely to prove resilient to hybrid forms of warfare. As Chapter 2 already discussed, the differing definitions and visualisation of what these HT entail proves to further complicate the environment within which they take place, along with the wider implications they spread in the security framework.

When observing hybrid threats and attempting to characterise their rise in frequency, the scope must be assessed. This report identifies the latter as trifold. Firstly, and most generally, *to expand influence* (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). The ideological coercion and occupancy of foreign actor can philosophically be perceived as the same as physical occupation. This can take place in a variety of spheres including the social structure, where an actor ushers in values and ideologies that are either preferred and in need of a push, or foreign-born altogether (Ibid, 2019). An example of this is the recently passed parliamentary law on foreign agents in Georgia. This, aimed at limiting Western oriented NGOs and freedom of expression initiatives, has explicitly been cited as the “Russian law” and shows how unconventional tactics were employed ahead of the vote.<sup>11</sup> Differently, it can be employed to fuel a coercive economic relationship, as it is in Armenia as a consequence of its energy dependency on Russia (Drent et al., 2015).

Secondly, another scope is that of *weakening an adversary* (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). There the objective is that of manipulating the political structure and/or the public opinion of a country in preparation or prevention of subsequent scenarios (Ibid, 2019). These tactics can be employed in anticipation of a military escalation, as in the case of Eastern Ukraine in late 2021, or to shield the target country from an adversary’s own means of influence, such as EU engagement in the South Caucasus (Olech, 2021).

Thirdly, especially relevant in the case Ukraine, hybrid threats have been utilised *against democracies* (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). Employing HT in this regard is especially desired as it is self reinforcing. Democratic values and reforms inherently bring about more transparency, freedom of speech, and the spread of information, which contribute to the resilience of a country against hybrid warfare. Therefore, by undermining democratic developments with HT, hybrid actors also ensure the continuation of an environment where its tactics can easily spread (Ibid, 2019). Disinformation and anti-democratic propaganda are commonly utilised tools by actors like Russia and China to slow down democratic reforms. This was apparent in Ukraine during the Maidan Square protests in 2014 (Schmäing, 2023).

What makes the usage of hybrid threats so desirable depends on the actor and its motives. Mainly, the obscurity and ambiguity surrounding those who employ HT already provides a large part of the appeal for its employment (Mumford & Carlucci, 2023). This remains desirable for both state and non-state actors. Nonetheless, where they differ is in the costs. The latter are especially susceptible to HT as they possess substantially limited sources, incapacitating them from operationalising full-scale warfare methods. This is visible when analysing the HT utilised by most terrorist organisations or religious groups, including the Orthodox Church of Georgia (Ladaria, 2012). Differently, a state actor could afford much larger military methods if it so wants. Overall, also the latter often remains more inclined to utilise hybrid forms of warfare as to avoid the infinitely larger costs required by military operations and full out conflict (Olech, 2021).

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<sup>10</sup> Council of the European Union (2022). A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence - For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security.

<sup>11</sup> Georgia's controversial, Russia-like "foreign agent" bill becomes law after weeks of protests. 2024. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/georgia-foreign-agent-bill-becomes-law-after-protests/>

Hybrid threats also differ in terms of its types, representatives of a wider range of tools and means. These are often characterised between traditional and modern methods (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). Traditional types, largely identified with those HTs utilised between the 1990s and 2008 include disinformation, often instrumentalist by propaganda (Ibid, 2019); unconventional warfare, spread with the logistical and financial support of militias and paramilitary groups (Kilcullen, 2019); and foreign/political interference, carried out via the infiltration of networks of agents in the state institutions of target countries (Darchiashvili, et al., 2019). However, as basic understanding of HT started to spread in Eastern Europe, along with the establishment of European initiatives like the EaP, the cross-sectorial nature of hybrid warfare expanded into more areas. These new types include various aspects of economic dependence, highlighted above by the energy partnerships (Gogolashvili et al., 2019); cyber attacks, which grew in frequency since 2017 with the help of so called “troll-factories” (Darchiashvili, et al., 2019); and passportization<sup>12</sup> processes, by which Russia offers unauthorised dual citizenship to territories it considers as its own (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). It is also worth mentioning that some types of traditional HT have overlapped into the modern ones as they developed their means and scope over time. Disinformation techniques have shifted accordingly from spreading pro Russian/Separatist propaganda in the EaP to more consistently focusing on anti-western content (Ibid, 2019). Similarly, unconventional warfare has grown to include the support of terrorists Jihadist groups like ISIS in their promotion of anti-western and radical ideals.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, these types of hybrid threats have a tendency of feeding into each other, as a mean of self reinforcement. Hybrid actors, including terrorist groups, often employ disinformation and cyber methods to spread propaganda on social media, suggesting the appearance of three distinct tactics all together (Olech, 2021; Tenenbaum 2016).

While the necessity to counter these hybrid threats is evident throughout Europe and beyond, the way to do so remains complex and often constrained. For once, as highlighted by the first sections of Chapter 5, national defence and security, both areas directly concerned with HT, remain solidly within the authority of the state, and undertaking international collective action is often discouraged (Stefan, 2023). Furthermore, offering meaningful and effective solutions against HT entails a deep understanding of the tactic employed, the actor and its motives, as well as the target country(ies) (Olech, 2021). Whereas multilevel security policy offered by the EU and NATO can, and to some extent, has proven effective, its scope and understanding of the challenge is made limited by internal and external constraints (ibid, 2021).

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<sup>12</sup> The term refers to the unauthorised creation of dual citizenships offered to populations and minorities in various areas of Georgia’s breakaway regions. These functions on many levels, including that of giving Russia a potential *Casus Belli* to intervene abroad in defence of its “citizens “. Gogolashvili, Paşa, Hovhannisyanyan, Ohiienko et al., (2019). *Hybrid Threats in EaP Countries – Building a Common Response*. 2019, 1-43.

<sup>13</sup> [www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/isis-returning-fighters/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/isis-returning-fighters/)



## CHAPTER 6: THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP (EaP)

*“The successful Europeanisation of the Eastern Partnership area cannot be anything but a dynamic process, marked with unexpected break throughs and/or setbacks.”*

Quote from Darchiashvili, D., & Bakradze, D. (2019).  
The EU eastern partnership initiative and Georgia. *Politeja*.

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) was established as one of the flag initiatives of the wider Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). It included six partner countries between Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, formalising relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova (Gahler, 2021). The idea was offered by Poland and later supported by Sweden (Olech, 2021); officially adopted at the Prague Summit with a joint declaration in 2009 (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). The programme’s objectives included deepening cooperation, and contributing to the country’s economic, political, and social development; ultimately aiming at improving the overall stability of the region altogether (Gahler, 2021). The significance of this partnership can also be seen as a step forward for the EU in terms of differentiating relations with its neighbours, beyond traditional enlargement strategies. The idea being the the EU and EaP countries can enjoy a functional, profitable, and stable relationship without necessarily aiming at accession as a final objective of it (Baltag, & Romanyshyn, 2023).

The EaP scope is based on four pillars of practical multilateral cooperation, respectively on democracy and good governance; economic integration and convergence with EU sectoral policies; energy security; and contacts between people (Darchiashvili et al., 2019). The initiative inherently incentives europeanisation as a mean of convergence between the EU and its partners, following a multi-step cooperation procedure.

Firstly, agreements are signed on visa facilitation and liberation, reflecting European values on freedom of movement. This initial step was easily enforced between 2011 and 2017 with 5 EaP countries, even expanding to visa-free travel options for Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova (Gahler, 2021). This matters as it opens the door to the following steps, offering fundamental basis for economic connectivity and social exchanges with ERASMUS<sup>14</sup> (European Commission 2020e, 33). Unsurprisingly, step two aims at deepening economic ties by the signing of Association Agreements (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreements. These have proven more challenging steps due to the historical economic vicinity, and dependency, of many of the EaP countries on Russia and other Eurasian partners (Stefan, 2023), as shown by Armenia’s and Azerbaijan’s continued membership in Russia’s Eurasia Economic Union<sup>15</sup> (EPRS, 2020). Nonetheless, already between 2016/2017, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine signed both agreements, and by 2020 the EU was either the primary or secondary trading partner with all EaP countries (Darchiashvili et al., 2019). These also opened the door to more financial assistance under the *More for More*<sup>16</sup> principle, offering large sums to EaP countries in times of crisis. Both Georgia and Moldova received more than €200

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<sup>14</sup> European Commission. (2020c). Erasmus+ annual report. Statistical annex. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/381dc9a5-3f4d-11eb-b27b-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>. Accessed 7 January 2021.

<sup>15</sup> EPRS (European Parliamentary Research Service). (2020). Eastern Partnership 3.0. Principles, priorities and prospects. Brussels. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2020/651966/EPRS\\_IDA\(2020\)651966\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2020/651966/EPRS_IDA(2020)651966_EN.pdf). Accessed 6 January 2021

<sup>16</sup> The More for More principle implies phased and individualised approach of the EU to its partners and conditionality. The More for More principle was adopted throughout the EU neighbourhood in 2011, following the so-called events of the Arab Spring and implied that additional reform efforts by partner countries were to be rewarded with additional financial and other support. “European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)”, European Union External Action Service, 21 December 2016.

million since 2010, while Ukraine got more than €15 billion since 2014 (European Commission 2021; European Commission 2020b).

Thirdly, Governance encompasses the next step of cooperation. It includes initiatives for the support of democratic election monitoring, trainings in the judicial systems, and anti-corruption reforms. Most of the EU efforts in this area are to uphold the rule of law and in promotion of transparent public administration (Gahler, 2019). Even in this step, the allocation of financial support is clear, especially in fighting corruption, as it was in with the €8 million package given to Moldova in 2019 (Ibid, 2019).

Political dialogue follows as the fourth step. This aims at constructing direct links between the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly with their EaP counterparts. Accordingly the scope is to foster cooperation in the political and democratic framework between EU MEPs and National parliaments of partner countries. Examples of this included the election observation and consultations in Ukraine, as well as the programmes and awards given for leadership and political development in the EaP (EPRS, 2020).

Lastly, the final step requires the involvement of civil society. This largely accounts for the presence of NGOs and other organisations for political activism, media, and engagement (Gahler, 2019). The European Endowment for Democracy (EDD) is one of the most prominent examples of this, supporting projects in all EaP counters for anti-corruption activities, freedom of the press, and fostering of dialogue (EED, 2020). This may be referred to as indirect influence of the EU but yet remains as a fundamentally beneficial and necessary step for mutual cooperation.

Finally, the positive nature of such partnership has contributed to the deepening of ties between the latter and the EaP nations. This can be seen as evidence to the effectiveness of European soft power, sine it is based on the attractiveness, rather than coercion, of what the EU can offer (Nye, 2004).

## 6.1 The EaP and Russia

Since 2009 the progress made by the EU with EaP countries is indisputable. Almost all areas of partnership have proved worth exploring. Europeanisation and Economic integration have brought these countries closer to the EU, and the EU closer to them. European Membership remains on the table for many of them, as candidate status was officially offered to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in late 2023, but it is not necessarily the ultimate scope of the Eastern Partnership (European Commission, 2023). However, whereas the EU has numerous attempts to frame the initiative as a *non-political tool*, external actors, first of which Russia, did not take much sympathy with it. In fact Moscow has proved largely opposed the EaP, perceiving it as a direct challenge to what is otherwise *Russia's legitimate sphere of influence*<sup>17</sup> (Nixey, 20216). Russia's irritation with the EaP is linked to its incapacity to perceive it as any different from NATO's expansion, which despite certain promises right after the fall of the USSR in 1991, offered membership to many post-Soviet nation states (Shelest, 2015). Moscow continues to believe that European and NATO enlargements are two faces of the same coin, and that protecting *some form of control* over those countries is of the essence (Nixey, 20216). The Eurasian Economic Union was in fact rolled out in response to the EaP, offering a custom's union with partner countries including Armenia and Belarus of the EaP (Gogolashvili et al., 2019), indirectly blocking their right to join the EU-backed DCFTA.

More generally, Russia also exercises its own soft power and influence over the Eastern Partnership. In such area, its main objective is to prevent integration of EaP countries into western institutions, and maintain as much control as possible (Darchiashvili et al., 2019). While largely incapable of using it to promote positive cooperation and regional

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<sup>17</sup> Direct quote from J. Nixey. *The Russia Question: Sovereignty and Legitimacy in Post-Soviet Eurasia*. Chatham House. 8 December 2016. Available from: [www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/russia-question-sovereignty-and-legitimacy-post-soviet-eurasia](http://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/russia-question-sovereignty-and-legitimacy-post-soviet-eurasia)

policy, this kind of influence can still be regarded as soft power (Hill, 2004). Justifications for this can be found in many cultural and economical fields. Firstly, the Russian language still is the lingua franca across the EaP, and its pop culture remains widely spread. Secondly, the energy dependency and economic influence that Moscow possesses over most EaP countries accounts for a large part of its continued relevance (Ibid, 2004). Beyond this, Russia has escalated its game of indirect influences and coercions in the attempt to undermine the Eastern Partnership, as well as the European Union altogether. These tools, dramatically increased in number, variety, and frequency since 2008, are of an hybrid nature, referred to as hybrid tactics or threats (Gahler, 2021).

However, due to the lack of a positive narrative behind it, Russia's soft power has gradually merged with its hybrid tactics, resulting in the corruption of its soft power into what is today merely one of the many features of its hybrid warfare campaigns (Darchiashvili et al., 2019). This is also due to the 1990s post-Soviet period where most former Soviet Republic were eager to move away from Russian influence as fast as possible. This disincentived any form of Russian soft power, inviting the latter to gradually shift its influence towards more aggressive methods (Muradov, 2022). Therefore, its means of "soft power" in the EaP became fuelled by propaganda based on shared linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Shelest, 2015); oil and other forms of energy exporting power (Trend et al., 2015); and the protection of what Moscow sees as its citizens via *passportisation* processes (Mackinnon, 2002).

## 6.2 EU Goals in the EaP against Hybrid Threats (Expectations)

*"The EU will be a responsible global stakeholder, but responsibility must be shared and requires investing in our partnerships."*

Quote from the European Union Global Strategy. EEAS, 2016

Europe's response to the issue of hybrid warfare was for too long vaguely contained within larger security frameworks of reference (Darchiashvili et al., 2019). Up until 2014, most goals and tools for tackling these tactics were limited to economic and political sanctions, often targeting Russia, supported by advisory and monitoring missions (EUAM Ukraine, 2014; OSCE, 2014). Nonetheless, since the establishment of the EaP in 2009, along with the further institutionalisation of agencies like the EEAS and policies such as the CFSP, a momentum was gathering demanding a for wider exploration of hybrid warfare in the region. This was furthered pushed along in 2013 by the creation of the EaP Panel on cooperation in the area of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which facilitated dialogue, intelligence-sharing, and experiences of different countries vis a vis hybrid threats and other kinds of challenges facing them (Darchiashvili et al., 2019).

The EU was quick to catch up and already by 2017 many mechanisms and strategies had been set in place, attempting to tackle what already seemed back then as a fast-spreading virus across the EaP and well into Western Europe too. However, formulating coherent legislation, backed up by viable action, beyond the Union's borders required the establishment of strategies that were long assumed to be out of reach for this *foreign policy dwarf* (Bickerton, 2010).

### 6.2.1 EU Strategy

*“[Resilience is] the ability to prepare for and adapt to changing conditions  
and withstand and recover rapidly from disruptions.”*

Quote from The White House: Office of the Press Secretary.  
(February 12, 2013)

The EU strategy that started taking place as of 2015 came out of three widely recognised pillars, over which most goals and means would then be formulated upon. These included awareness, coordination, and resilience, and are explored accordingly.

*Awareness* may be viewed as a conveniently simple pillar to begin from, nonetheless, given the ambiguous nature of hybrid threats, along with the difficulty to be identified and understood, the concept assumes a fundamentally strategic starting point. Raising awareness over what HTs are, the forms they can assume, and the reasons for their utilisation allowed the EU and its wider public to begin constructions on cohesive legislation and tools-creation (Stefan, 2023). This is especially important when it comes to partner countries in the EaP, where the free flow of informational awareness is the first to be threatened by hybrid tactics. Secondly, *coordination*, reflects a wider consensus on the issue of tackling cross-sectoral, international networks of threats and actors that would not be easily traceable and countered by single entities. In fact, despite the often tailored-made format of hybrid threats based on the target country, coordinated efforts amongst national governments and agencies offer potential advantages for countering of HT (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). This suggest that countries of the EaP are invited to share and learn from one another on the subject of hybrid warfare, as well as to establish coordinative relations with external actors like the EU and NATO. Since the first missions and countering measures were rolled out, it has been calculated that a major factor in their success was dependent on the degree of coordination between the parties involved (Olech, 2021). The overlap of NATO and EU missions is sometimes cause of concern, whereas a collective approach between them proves more efficient (Ibid, 2021). Thirdly, *resilience* is identified as the last, and possibly most contested pillar of them all. Since 2016 the concept has been featured in almost all relevant legislation as the ultimate goal for these societies against hybrid threats (European Commission, 2016). Depending the on the document, resilience is often represented as a way to ensure a country’s capacity to respond, limit, recover, and possibly, prevent HTs (Stefan, 2023). Within the EaP, increasing resilience refers to the construction of protective firewalls against attacks on critical infrastructure, cyber sectors, energy, financial systems and transports (European Commission, 2018; Koziol, 2022). The success of this final pillar heavily depends on its whole-of-society approach, as strengthening certain sectors while undermining the security of others invites the spillover of HTs into the latter (Kalniete & Pildegovičs, 2021).

These pillars constitute the basis for all EU legislation over the subject of hybrid threats, consequently responsible for the elaboration of those goals that since 2009 have characterised the expectations of the EU for its partnerships with the EaP nations.

## 6.2.2 EU framework and legislation

The threat of hybrid warfare and its tactics is reflected in the number of EU legislation that refers to it. As of writing, an impressive amount of documents is concerned with the issue and its cross-sectoral implications, especially when considering that pre-2016, little no none had even mentioned hybrid threats. In fact before then, the two regulating articles responsible for giving the Union power of action against hybrid threats were the mutual assistance clause (Treaty of the European Union (TEU), Article 42.7) and the solidarity clause (Treaty on the Functioning of the

European Union (TFEU), Article 222). Both of these merely looked at internal situations, and aimed at addressing situation in which MSs may require assistance of others in the field of hybrid threats (Deen, Zandee, & Stoetman, 2022).

Today, new pieces of legislation effectively construct what is the dataset of European security goals for countering hybrid threats, and in doing so, empower the Union, its agencies, member states (MS), and partners, with the legitimacy they need to act against them. The articles and declarations published and voted upon largely reflect the wider framework of the EU strategy against hybrid threats, characterised by its three pillars discussed above. Below is offered a brief presentation of all EU documents relevant to the case, observable in Table 5.

<i>EU documents</i>
- EU Global Security Strategy (2016) - <a href="https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf">https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf</a>
- Joint framework on countering hybrid threats (2016) - <a href="https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52016JC0018">https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52016JC0018</a> .
- '20 deliverables for 2020' (2017) - <a href="https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44362/20-deliverables-for-2020.pdf">https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44362/20-deliverables-for-2020.pdf</a>
- Joint communication on increasing resilience and bolstering capabilities to address hybrid threats (2018) - <a href="https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018JC0016">https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018JC0016</a>
- EU security Union Strategy (2020) - <a href="#">EU Security Union Strategy - COM(2020) 605 final</a> - <a href="#">European Agenda on Security – Legislative documents</a> - <a href="#">Mapping of measures related to enhancing resilience and countering hybrid threats - SWD(2020) 152 final</a> - <a href="#">The landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model</a>
- European Strategic Compass (2022) - <a href="https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf">https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf</a>
- European External Action Service EEAS. (2024). 'Countering Hybrid threats'. Strategic Communication. <a href="https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/2024-countering-Hybrid-Threats.pdf">https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/2024-countering-Hybrid-Threats.pdf</a>
- Annual Reports: 2017: <a href="#">JOIN/2017/030 final</a> 2018: <a href="#">JOIN(2018) 14 final</a> 2019: <a href="#">SWD(2019) 200/2 final</a> 2020: <a href="#">SWD (2020) 153 final</a> 2021: <a href="#">SWD (2021) 729 final</a> 2022: <a href="#">SWD (2022) 308 final</a> 2023: <a href="#">SWD (2023) 315</a>

Table 5

On top of those, multiple summits, declarations, communications, and statements have been done to further legitimise the EU's goals over the issue of hybrid threats (Stefan, 2023). An assessment of these documents, offers the following results on what areas and objectives reflect the expectations of the EU over countering HT. These are subdivided amongst the three pillars of strategy discussed above.

In the field of awareness, the joint framework (European Commission 2016) and the joint communication (European Commission, 2018) stand out. The former includes what was then the first collective definition of hybrid threats offered by an EU body, which offered the following description: “[Hybrid threats are a] mixture of coercive and

subversive activities, conventional and unconventional methods (diplomatic, military, economic, technological), which can be used in coordinated way by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives, being, at the same time, below the threshold of officially declared war” (European Commission, 2016). The broad definition attached to the concept of hybrid threats is so that the scope of the document, and of those that followed, allow for a wide, cross-border, and cross-sectoral legitimacy of response (Stefan, 2023). This is also done to reflect the variety of priorities and preferences amongst its 27 member states (MS). The objectives set out are partially dictated upon already existing goals offered by other actions and plans, spacing from the European Union Maritime Security Strategy<sup>18</sup>, the EU Agenda on Security<sup>19</sup>, and the Energy security strategy<sup>20</sup>, to name a few (Ibid, 2023). There, the goal of expanding awareness is highlighted by three main articles on recognising HTs, strategic communications, and establishing centres of excellence. These are supported by a series of actions that specifically set out the goals over each area, including the analysis of open source information, hybrid risk analysis, and the creation of research centres (European Commission, 2016). The 2018 communication further reinforces those areas by expanding the role of the EEAS and the High Representative (HR/VP) in promoting and coordinating reports and meetings on the nature of hybrid threats (European Commission, 2018). Ultimately, the EU Strategic Compass of 2022 notably highlighted the role that intelligence should have in strengthening situational awareness and threats forecasting (Council of the European Union, 2022).

For cooperation, the goals spread from different policy-fields, reflected by multiple legislation. Already in 2017 the '20 deliverables for 2020' stressed the necessity to achieve cooperation against the already rising in frequency hybrid attacks, most notably observed by its deliverable 12.<sup>21</sup> This is later reinforced by the joint framework, which focuses on expanding coordination in the Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), of which EaP is part, incentivising partner countries to apply for hybrid risk surveys and information sharing mechanisms (European Commission, 2016). A more explicit request for increased external coordination with NATO is enshrined too, calling for more dialogue on crisis prevention, response, and decision making process. (Ibid, 2016). The 2016 EU global security strategy, and the 2018 communication focused instead on enhancing internal coordination amongst MSs against hostile intelligence, especially in the field of economics and finance<sup>22</sup> (EEAS, 2016; European Commission, 2018). Also for this end, the objectives see the EEAS and the Commission expanding their role and authority over coordinating mechanisms and in representation of the Union's posture against hybrid threats (Ibid, 2018). The Strategic Compass later reconsiders the reach of coordinating mechanisms and enhanced the scope to include partnership in the G7, and the United Nations (UN) (Council of the European Union, 2022).

Ultimately, and by far most thoroughly, the area of resilience is addressed in most EU documents. While the Union does not have a country-specific vision for each partner, especially in the EaP, it does nonetheless associate building resilience, seen as their *ability to reform thus withstanding recovering from internal and external crises*, as evidence of success (EEAS, 2018). Originally, the goals over such concept were specifically spelled out in the fields of critical infrastructure and defence capabilities. There, the objectives include identifying and protecting those sectors

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<sup>18</sup> <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST%2011205%202014%20INIT/EN/pdf>

<sup>19</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_15\\_4865](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_15_4865)

<sup>20</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52014DC0330>

<sup>21</sup> Brussels, 9.6.2017 SWD (2017) 300 final JOINT STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT Eastern Partnership - 20 Deliverables for 2020 Focusing on key priorities and tangible results. Available from: [www.ec.europa.eu/neighbourhoodenlargement/sites/near/files/eap\\_20\\_deliverables\\_for\\_2020.pdf](http://www.ec.europa.eu/neighbourhoodenlargement/sites/near/files/eap_20_deliverables_for_2020.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> An example of an area which would benefit from increased coordination between Member States is investment screening, on the basis of a Regulation *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a framework for screening of foreign direct investments into the European Union*, COM(2017) 487.

most vulnerable to HT, and call for the creation of agencies for the safeguarding of industries and financial systems (European Commission, 2016). Crisis management and recovery are also stressed as fields over which stability shall be ensured, calling for the expansion of those civilian/military tools necessary to the task (Ibid, 2016). Later, cyber security also became a critical area of discussion for resilience building, over which the European Parliament and Council are to spell out and conclude negotiations for the creation of cyber security agreements and response mechanisms (European Commission, 2018). The threats of cyber attacks was such that a cyber diplomacy toolbox is also called upon for the achievement of such goals (ibid, 2018). The goals over resilience also explicitly underscore the necessity to establish deep commitments and policy-driven actions in response to hybrid attacks, over which partners countries are to agree upon and actively participate (Council of the European Union, 2022). All these objectives seemingly put a spotlight on guarding and maintaining the support given to partner countries in building their own resilience, as expressed by the EU global security strategy (EEAS, 2016).

These goals are further supported by a variety of context- and concept-specific documents and plans. An example of the latter being the Disinformation Action Plan (European Council, 2018), explicitly set up against hybrid tactics of disinformation and propaganda; or the EaP cooperation steps (Gahler, 2021) altogether, discussed at the beginning of chapter 6. Both of these also constitute evidence to what can be associated with the goals of the European Union against hybrid threats, as they entail the promotion of reforms and actions for the countering of such tactics and the realisation of wider EU strategy. Finally, the goals and objectives overviewed in this section characterise what this report associates with the expectations of the Union against hybrid threats.

## 6.3 EU (Soft) Means and Resources (Capabilities)

European means and resources for combating hybrid threats are an ever evolving set. Their role is that implementing, enforcing, and achieving those directives and goals set out by the European Union within and beyond its borders. While this report focuses on soft power tools, it is worth mentioning that some of the instruments at the EU disposal also fall in the category of hard power. These often entail the direct participation of MSs armed forces, coordinated via mechanisms such as PESCOs (Blockmans, & Crosson, 2021). Overall it remains fundamental for any effective soft power polity to be backed up by credible hard power means (Nye, 2011).

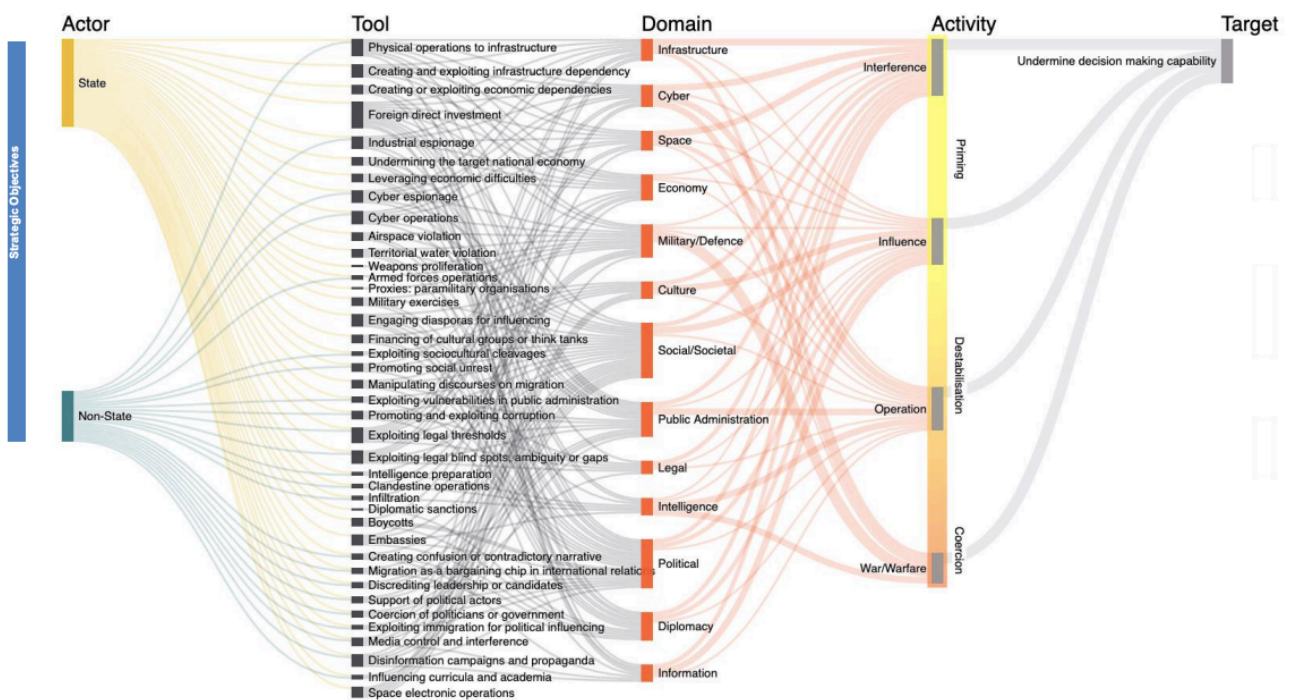
Institutionally speaking, the tools available to the Union against hybrid threats are distinguished into two level. A higher one, characterised by the joint efforts of the EU and NATO, often more focused on political issues of capacity building and strategic communication; and a lower one, usually involving partner countries directly with member states (Filipec, 2023). As to maintain the scope of this research on European Soft power tools, the chapter largely assesses the role of those instruments on the higher level. Nonetheless, it acknowledges the added value offered by lower level tools of coordination, awareness, and resilience building.

### 6.3.1 EU-wide Means

Inter-institutional tools are constructed by the three European bodies of the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of Ministers, in close cooperation with the European Defence Agency and NATO (Ibid, 2023). The sources of such are nonetheless rooted much deeper into the European framework, as its soft power generates largely from values and norms (Nielsen, 2013). Indeed some of the main venues are cultural appeal (Clarke, Bull, & Deganutti, 2020), political values, and public diplomacy (Nye, 2004).

The resulting means of European soft power are of three spheres. Firstly, the economic one. Very straightforwardly, this dimension accounts for the profitability and appeal of European markets for the furthering of partnerships and the deepening of ties with third countries (Delcour & Tulmets 2007). These utilise economic relationship, financial incentives, and generous development policies as means to influence recipient countries into adhering to agreed upon frameworks. In the case of hybrid threats, the economic sphere offers third countries tangible incentives to undertake efforts against HT and for resisting its influences (ibid, 2007). Differently, the second area, that of ideology and values, utilises tools that are not of a tangible nature, but that can prove effective nonetheless. As soft power itself rests on the attraction of shared values (Nye, 2004; European Commission, 2004), furthering commitments on human rights and democracy, through conditionality principles, has proven efficient. Lastly the sphere of attractiveness accounts for many EU soft power tools, even though indirectly. This is the case as the Union utilises narratives of integration and stability as means for the furthering of its goals, including upholding the rule of law, fighting corruption and autocracy in the recipient countries (Nielsen, 2013). All these are promoted by EU policies abroad, including the CFSP and the EaP, operationalised by specific agreements like AA, DCFTA, and Bilateral agreements.

Nonetheless, since the steadily increasing frequency of hybrid threats after 2014, the EU started realising the relative incapacity of wider tools of soft power to tackle HT effectively (Bryjka, 2022). This gave way to the creation of specific framework of reference against HT, discussed in 6.2, to be backed by equally subject-specific instruments. The procedure began with the subdivision different hybrid threats within 13 camps, spacing from infrastructure and political to cyber and space (Lasoen, 2022). See figure 3 for the complete list. Instruments and camp-specific tools were to be built independently and collectively positioned within a European hybrid toolbox (EUHT) (Bajarūnas, 2020). The latter, officially rolled out only in 2022, was consciously catalogued as *open in nature* (European Commission, 2016). This was done as to account for the multilevel and multilateral nature of hybrid threats, shifting in means and across across the board, often also taking advantages of external factors like health, environmental, and immigration crises (Bryjka, 2022). The instruments that resulted since their first inception in 2016 were largely constructed reflecting the priorities and goals of the Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats (2016) and called into operationalisation with the EU Strategic Compass (2022). Accordingly, it includes instruments for the expansion of awareness amongst societies, coordination between partners, and resilience building across regions (European Commission, 2016; Bryjka, 2022).





Taken from Giannopoulos, Smith & Theocharidou, *The Landscape of Hybrid Threats*, 2021,

### 6.3.2 The European Hybrid Toolbox (EUHT)

*“Acting as an overall framework, it [EUHT] brings together other relevant response mechanisms and instruments [...]. It improves the effectiveness and coherence of various actions, and therefore brings added value to the EU’s capabilities in responding to hybrid threats.”*

*Quote from the Council of the EU. Press Release. 2024.*

The purpose of the EUHT is to identify complex and multifaceted hybrid campaigns, as well as to coordinate tailor-made and cross-sectoral responses to them (Council of the EU, 2024). It does so by establishing agencies and centres for the elaboration of information, mechanisms, and procedures against hybrid warfare within and beyond European borders. Its tools are often rolled out accordingly to previously existing NATO ones, increasing the level of interconnectivity between institutions and organisations.

For the goal of expanding awareness, already in 2016 the Hybrid Fusion Cell was created at the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre (EU INTCENT). This, operational since 2017, is responsible for the publishing of reports, analysis and briefings on the subject of hybrid threats and its latest developments across the board (Bryjka, 2022). Its wider scope is that of detecting early traces of HTs and accelerate the collective response of the EU and its partners against them (Ibid, 2022). It is made up of both civilian and military staff, and largely focuses on the Eastern flank and the ENP (Stefan, 2023). The Hybrid Fusion Cell works in close partnership with the NATO Hybrid Analysis Cell, reflecting the inter-institutional nature of this instrument (Bajarūnas, 2020). In this area, also the Centre for Excellence (Hybrid CoE) was established. Less institutionalised, this acts as a think tank for the continuous research and analysis of HTs. It utilises simulation games and workshops to test the readiness of actors against such attacks (Stefan, 2023).

In terms of building resilience, the EUHT activated multiple tools, more or less subject-specific. For example, both the East StratCom task of the EEAS (2015) and the Disinformation Action Plan (European Commission, 2018) are strictly relevant to the countering of disinformation (Bajarūnas, 2020). They work for the continuous analysis and monitoring of messaging and propaganda in more than 20 languages, fusing on actors like Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran (Bryjka, 2022). Differently, in the field of cyber security, agencies such as the European Network and Information Security Agency (ENISA) and the European Cyber Security Organisation (ECSO) have been established. These work closely in supporting military operations like PESCO, as well as or the deepening of public-private cooperation (Ibid, 2022). In the field of energy and economics, early roundtables and centres for excellence (NATO Energy Security Center for Excellence, 2017) have been established too; while for counter-terrorism the work of EUROPOL remains vital (Bossong, 2012).

Ultimately, and equally relevant to the building of resilience, coordination tools and mechanisms have been established. First and foremost, the Hybrid Rapid Response Teams (EURHRTs) are currently being rolled out with reference to the NATO Counter Hybrid Support Teams of 2018 (Stefan, 2022). These are composed by civilian experts for the purpose of offering quick support and logistical assistance to countries targeted by HTs (Bryjka, 2022). As of May 2024, the Council approved the EURHRTs for usage upon a member state's request, expanding the reach of such a tool for coordinating amount partners and assisting them (The Council of the EU, 2024). While their scope has been defined as “key” in supporting collective EU action against hybrid threats, their effectiveness is thus far difficult to measure due to its recent operationalisation (Stefan, 2023). Moreover, other mechanisms like the European Emergency Response Coordination Centre have also been established for the furthering of EU-NATO coordination in the field (NATO, 2019). Cooperation is furthered also between the European Defence Agency (EDA) and the centres of excellence on the subject of digitalisation and technologies via the exchange of information between the Cyber Emergency Response Team (CERT-EU) (Kaca, 2021) and the NATO Computer Incident Response Capability (NCIRC) (Bryjka, 2022). These often include data on infrastructure and softwares that are directly responsible for carrying out cyber attacks or disinformation operations (Kaca, 2021).

Finally, these tools of the EUHT represent a major part of the European collective effort to back up its commitments with viable action and realistic capabilities (Council of the EU, 2024). The instruments presented above work for the furthering of positive objectives against hybrid threats, and while offering logistical support to some military operations (Blockmans et al., 2021) largely operate in the soft power domain and secure framework of the EU.

## CHAPTER 7: EaP CASES

*“Soft power is a lovely thing, but so far, it basically involves being nice to people and showing how nice we are in return. It’s not a particularly useful tool when dealing with people whose objective is to destroy us.”*

*Quote from Keir Giles, Russia Eurasia programme at Chatham House.  
In conversation with Author. May 2024.*

This section presents the countries of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine as case studies of the wider Eastern Partnership (EaP). These have been chosen for series of reasons that unfortunately positions each and everyone of them at the centre of contemporary hybrid warfare (Grimsvik, 2024). All of them in fact have been repeatedly experiencing a dramatic frequency of hybrid threats on their territory, largely due to Russia’s continued influence (Gogolashvili et al, 2019). Moreover, all three case studies are currently fighting to preserve their territorial integrity, as well as the independence and legitimacy of their central government (Freire, 2024). Moreover, both Ukraine and Georgia suffer from a presence of areas of limited statehood (ALS) and contested orders (CO), as a consequence of hybrid warfare. (Kakachia, Legucka, & Lebanidze, 2021). The objectives of the HTs they face are often to undermine their state institutions and political class, support separatists groups, and weaken their own national identity. These and others can be observed in Table 2 reported above (Gogolashvili et al, 2019). On the other hand, all three countries have been offered candidate status by the European Union in late 2023, and most recently, at the time of writing in June 2024, both Ukraine and Moldova have officially started the negotiation procedure. Furthermore, while reporting setbacks and difficulties, the population of these nations has continuously shown high rates of support for European integration and the Euro-Atlantic alliance.

For all these reasons the countries of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine constitute a resourceful sample for this EaP case study, and while their respective situations are assessed individually, it is this report’s intention to draw links between the threats they face, the progress observed, and the role that European soft power has had in the equation. However a few limitations are evident, and considered throughout this case study analysis as variables. Firstly, the case to case basis. When assessing the Eastern Partnership it is wise to consider each case individually, as the internal circumstances of any state are ultimately unique and cannot be generalised (Darchiashvili et al, 2019). An especially transparent example of this can be observed in Ukraine’s current war, which drastically influences the reach and performance of both hybrid threats and European soft power tools because of it. (Ibid, 2019). Secondly, another variable to consider are each state’s own vulnerabilities. It is in fact said that while soft power can have a positive impact over many fields of partnership, countering hybrid threats included, some of it inevitably depends on the recipient’s own capacities and will to overcome its internal challenges. This is relevant as hybrid threats become increasingly successful in countries where institutions and governments remain weak, disorganised, and undemocratic (Bernstein, 2015).

Ultimately, each country’s case is assessed in terms of its history vis a vis the hybrid threats they experience, along with the current framework for countering them. What emerges is an effective representation of the extent to which European soft power contributed, positively or otherwise.

## 7.1 Moldova

*“Enlarging the EU is the only way to ensure that our neighbourhood remains anchored in the free world and that we provide a better life for our citizens”*

*Quote from Moldovan President Maia Sandu  
(Press Releases – Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2023)*

The republic of Moldova has been the subject of hybrid threats, largely orchestrated by Russia, since its independence in 1991 (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). Proxy wars and military confrontation in 1992 opened the door to Russian interference and physical presence on the territory of Moldova’s two breakaway, semi independent regions, Transnistria and Gagauzia. Both are to this day de facto controlled by Russia, and the maintenance of such status quo is incredibly linked to the latter’s hybrid tactics (Stănescu, 2023). Nonetheless, as Moldovan authorities continue to view this as a top priority for their national security, the government in Chişinău has longed looked at the EU for integration, development, and future partnership (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). Despite its formal request for accession to the European Union only in 2022 after the war in Ukraine broke out, Moldova has been a champion of EU integration in Eastern Europe for many years, pushing for democratic reforms and stimulating economic growth (Stănescu, 2023).

### 7.1.1 Background and Hybrid threats

Since 1992, despite the collapse of the USSR, Russia has continued to view Moldova, as it is the case with most other EaP countries too, as a “privileged zone of influence” over which Moscow legitimately holds political and economic influence (Cubic, 2024). To do so, beyond the 1500 “peace keepers” that were deployed right after the ceasefire in Transnistria (Stănescu, 2023), Russia has rolled out an aggressive policy of hybrid warfare, mainly focused on disinformation and unconventional warfare (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). These includes the constant flow of propaganda about the alleged ultra-nationalist government in Chişinău<sup>23</sup>; the spread of xenophobic messages, and regular financial support to the separatists in the two breakaway regions (Mînzărari, & Bucătaru, 2018). It is in fact no surprise that within those, the levels of hybrid threats and targets have been much higher than anywhere else in the country (Stănescu, 2023). These are showcased by Russia’s influence on local elections in both Transnistria, where the opposition leader was assassinated, and Gagauzia, where the pro-Russian leading party was found to be heavily corrupted (Ibid, 2023). However, other hybrid actors are involved, despite their efforts often being supported by Moscow indirectly. These include the Orthodox Church, as well as organised crime networks, mostly composed of Moldovan nationals linked to the Russian mafia (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). Hence, despite its European aspirations, signalled already in 1994 with a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU (Baz, & Ishar, 2023), many sectors of the state have actually fallen behind in terms of corruption and economic dependencies.<sup>24</sup> Dignitaries and state officials are often found to have sold secrets or sensible information for bribes, as it was in the Moldovan laundromat scheme that laundered more than 22 billions USD with the Russian Federation in 2019.<sup>25</sup> Most notably though, is the economic dependency that the country continues to have on Russia, especially in the energy sector, where the state imports 100% of its gas from Russia, while sustaining a state deficit of \$549.4 million in 2023 (Stănescu,

<sup>23</sup> Examples of these included false accusations against the central government suggesting that the latter was attempting to destroy the cultural heritage and identity of the residents of Transnistria and Gagauzia. Find more at: [www.ape.md/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/TRN\\_2018-03-22\\_ENG\\_2.pdf](http://www.ape.md/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/TRN_2018-03-22_ENG_2.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Full story by M. Williams, “Election May Keep Moldova in ‘Gray Zone’ between West and Russia”, Reuters, 19 February 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Full story at: [watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Russian-laundromat-Eng-2.pdf](http://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Russian-laundromat-Eng-2.pdf)

2023). Consequently, Moscow routinely exploits such dependencies, mostly by controlling the flow of energy imports of GazProm in exchange for influence over policymaking (Ibid, 2023). Furthermore, electoral interference and propaganda is made more accessible by the Moldovan media outlets, which remain very underfunded and mostly owned by the political class, often indirectly controlled by Moscow (Ibid, 2023). Most importantly, these channels are often used to undermine Western integration and the pro-European leadership in Chişinău.

Ultimately, recent NATO reports have suggested that while Moldova does not face an immediate military threat, its continued sustainment of hybrid warfare, along with various other internal pressures with the breakaway regions, remains of grave concern to Moldovans and their partner (NATO, 2023).

### 7.1.2 Counter-measures and the EU

Despite such developments, Moldova has for the longest time failed to construct a framework against hybrid threats, but instead rolled out specific counter measures depending on some circumstances. Example of this were the 2005 measures to protect their national elections against foreign interference and destabilisation; the 2014 detainment of some Russian special service forces; or most notably<sup>26</sup>, the 2018 law approved by the Parliament prohibiting the sharing of political and military news from the Russian federation via national broadcasting channels (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). While worth mentioning, these did not however slow down the frequency of hybrid threats in the country, and up until 2018, Moldova was often accused of not doing enough for its own security (Ibid, 2019). Nonetheless, since then, with a newly formed government completely stashed with pro-European ministers, gradual progress began to be observable. Along with EU support, already in 2018 a national information security strategy was rolled out, focusing increasingly resilience against cyber attacks and disinformation.<sup>27</sup> In this regard the EEAS East StratCom task force (ESTF) has proven effective in developing resilience to media manipulation (Ratsyborinska, 2022). To this day, the ESTF continues to spread awareness and has successfully debunked more than 16500 instances of disinformation (European Parliament, 2024). More recently, Chişinău doubled down its effort in the information sector by banning symbols associated with Russian aggression, Moscow backed broadcasting channels, and the physical entrance of Russian representatives in the country (Stănescu, 2023). An even bigger step was taken with the creation of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation, constructed under the guidance and unshifts offered by the Centres of Excellence of the EU Hybrid Toolbox. This has proved substantially effective for the gathering of information, establishment of nation-wide anti HT tactics, and promotion of workshops on resilience building (Ibid, 2023).

Another catalyst that seems to have shaken Moldova into action has been the war in Ukraine, which almost immediately triggered its will to apply for EU accession, and establish the NATO-Ukraine Platform on Countering Hybrid Warfare. This development has effectively brought Moldova closer to the EU, NATO, but more importantly, to Ukraine. The newly found bilateral channel has allowed for capacity-sharing and the creation of HT detection tools for bolstering resilience and the studying of each country's own vulnerabilities (Hybrid CoE, 2023).<sup>28</sup> In the field of economics, the role of the European Union and its soft power is the most evident. An AA and DCFTA were signed in 2014 already, and Moldovans quickly were granted access to the Schengen Area (Baz, & Ishar, 2023). Moreover, since February 2022, Moldova's exports have shifted drastically towards the European Single market, accounting roughly for 70% of its total

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<sup>26</sup> Find full story at: [www.realitatea.md/scandal-la-kremlin--cei-5-cetateni-ai-rusiei-si-ucrainei--retinuti-de-sis-si-procuratura--expulzati\\_11950.html](http://www.realitatea.md/scandal-la-kremlin--cei-5-cetateni-ai-rusiei-si-ucrainei--retinuti-de-sis-si-procuratura--expulzati_11950.html)

<sup>27</sup> Full story at [www.rm.coe.int/3-moldova-strategy/168097eceb](http://www.rm.coe.int/3-moldova-strategy/168097eceb)

<sup>28</sup> Hybrid CoE - The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. (2023). Hybrid threats as concept, available at: <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-threats-as-a-phenomenon/>, accessed on October 2023.

exports (Stănescu, 2023) and 45% of its imports (Baz, & Ishar, 2023). Moreover, other European guidelines, Chişinău has chose to create a Cyber Security Agency, under the Ministry for Economic Development and Digitalisation, for the protection its cyber infrastructure and regulatory frameworks (Stănescu, 2023). Finally, on electoral interference and corruption, Moldova continues to struggle, as the stalemate with its breakaway regions, mostly not recognising one another's legitimacy vis a vis the central government, suggests the sustained capacity of Russia and other hybrid actor to maintain the desired status quo (Baz, & Ishar, 2023).

The EU's geopolitical interests in Moldova go beyond its membership to the EaP, as it concerns Europe's own security and defence given the country's geographical location, especially at this time with the unfolding conflict in Ukraine. Therefore another case for continued European efforts and support to Moldova is to be observed in the Union's own MSs security and defence concerns. The role that European soft power and norms have had on the country brought relative progress, economic and security reforms, accompanied by a diminished dependency on Russia (Ibragimova, 2023). Nonetheless, the continued stalemate with the breakaway regions constitute a major roadblock for the furthering of EU integration, with some even suggesting that Moldova should consider signing a union agreement with Romania, already an EU member (Baz, & Ishar, 2023). Ultimately, the way forward, along with its capacity to choose, is linked to the country's capacity to counter hybrid threats and construct a genuinely stable framework for its own security.

## 7.2 Georgia

Georgia gained independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The contemporary state of affairs of the country, situated in the South Caucasus, remains strictly linked to the geopolitical influences of major external actors, including Russia, Turkey, the United States, the EU, and most recently China. Its brief history as an independent nation has unfortunately been marked by prolonged (frozen) conflict and instabilities, largely due to its Soviet past, as well as internal social pressures. Its territorial integrity remains disputed by two breakaway regions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, while the government in Tbilisi continues to shift between pro-Western and pro-Russian ideologies. As it is observed, most of its difficulties are deeply rooted in hybrid warfare tactics and sustained efforts of external player to control the country and its wider region. However, as the Georgian population shows increasing desires for Western and especially European integration, the role of the EU against hybrid threats is observed.

### 7.2.1 Background and Hybrid threats

The experience of Georgians with conflict in recent times goes hand in had with the country's independence. In fact, already in 1991, the region of South Ossetia, once divided from its Northern counterpart, which is part of the Russian Federation, attempted to claim autonomy from the central government (German, 2016). The then newly established Georgian government swiftly responded escalating the situation into an armed conflict. Similarly, another region of the country, Abkhazia, once under direct Soviet control before being given to the Georgian Soviet Republic in 1931, also declared independence from Georgia in 1992 despite its Abkhazian population merely accounting for 18% of the territory against the 46% Georgians (German, 2006). After much violence an agreement was reached in September 1992 conferring Tbilisi territorial integrity with restricted military authority over the two regions, where Russian soldiers were stationed as peacekeepers (Helsinki Commission Report, 2018). Temporary monitoring groups were also

sent by Moscow over the 1990s, instituting a foot on the ground in the country indefinitely (Muradov, 2022). By the end of the decade it was clear that Russia was attempting to restore its influence throughout the area, via partaking in every conflict and the subsequent resolutions with the aim to remain as a relevant and powerful actor over the country (Trenin, 1996). To maintain such a foothold Russia resorted to various hybrid tactics, largely on the front of disinformation, to boost its own image as a security actor, and of unconventional warfare, to support financially the separatist groups along the borders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Gogolashvili, 2019). This was further escalated after a famously pro-Western government in Tbilisi started considering EU membership in 2003. The perceived momentum, followed at the EU level by the creation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), attracted once more Russia's eye over the nation, resulting eventually the 2008 war (Darchiashvili, 2019). It has been argued that such an escalation into a linear war allowed Russia to fulfil all of these goals, having weakened the Georgian army; reasserted its control over the region; and potentially deterred the West from expanding its influence in the South Caucasus (Cohen, & Hamilton 2011).

The resulting 2009 was characterised by two major developments, bound to shape the future of the country. On the one hand, only months after the ceasefire, both breakaway regions signed the Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Support with Russia, effusively granting Moscow the right to establish and man military bases there, violating the original treaty with Tbilisi in 1992 (Gerrits, & Bader, 2016). While on the other, Georgia officially joined the Eastern Partnership and established profound ties with the European Union, resulting in the negotiation of a AA (Sukhiashvili, 2012). There started a series of events, still unfolding today, seeing Georgia balancing its deepening relations with the West while attempting to reduce the threats posed by Russia and the breakaway regions. Early on the strategies of Moscow relied heavily on trade embargoes and limited economic ties with Tbilisi, effectively cutting down its own soft power over the country (Gogolashvili, 2019). These were later lifted as energy and economic partnerships offered Russia more opportunities to influence the state and spread HTs. Examples of these can be found as Moscow's recommendations to private companies continue to dictate the flow of exports to Georgia based on external events and political reasons (Ibid, 2019). Cyber attacks have also increased since its early usage in the 2008 war, now attempting to break into government's officials PCs and steal sensitive material. More often than not, these tactics aim at gathering intelligence on Tbilisi ties with the West, as underlined by the renewed case of a cyber breach which attempted to steal documents marked under key words like "EU", "NATO", "EMBASSY" (Ibid, 2019). Internal pressures continue to be fuelled by terrorist groups, identifying 50 ISIS fighters only in 2017<sup>29</sup>, and the Orthodox Church indirect ties to Moscow, followed by foreign interference efforts to penetrate Georgian state institutions and law enforcement structure (Rezvani, 2020). Finally, Russian "passportisation" tactics continue to spread unofficial dual citizenships across the breakaway regions in an attempt to legitimise future military interference in the name of protecting Russian nationals against the central government (Gogolashvili, 2019).

Ultimately, while Russian hybrid tactics continue to shape much of Georgia's instabilities, the country's own bad governance and socio-economic underdevelopment<sup>30</sup> (IMF, 2020). High unemployment (around 14% in 2023<sup>31</sup>) characterised by corruption and rent seeking, remain as deeply rooted causes behind the country's perceived inability to deliver on effective reforms and in deterring government breakdowns (Kakachia et al., 2021).

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<sup>29</sup> Full story at: [www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/isis-returning-fighters/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/isis-returning-fighters/)

<sup>30</sup> See IMF. World Economic Outlook, October 2020: A Long and Difficult Ascent. IMF, October, 2020. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/09/30/world-economic-outlook-october-2020>.

<sup>31</sup> See <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/683/Employment-Unemployment>

## 7.2.2 Counter-measures and the EU

While the 2008 war surely accounted for a bloody chapter of Georgian contemporary history, and despite the arguably profitable gains made by Russia discussed above, the episode marked a powerful moment in time for Georgia. With the EaP and its AA signed by 2014, the country was quickly shifting its attention and opportunities towards the West. The show of support witnessed by Georgians from European partners during and in the aftermath of the war caused for a change in attitude, and pushed Tbilisi towards new policy agendas (Darchiashvili et al., 2019). By 2016 the Georgian Parliament had signed into law a bi-partisan resolution on foreign policy priorities, explicitly emphasising its commitments to the Euro-Atlantic alliance (ibid, 2019). This was due to the capacity of European soft power to offer the country economic incentives, via AA and other agreements, as well as political, with EU-induced public administration reforms (Kakachia et al., 2021). Both proved vital first steps towards constructing resilience and spreading awareness against hybrid threats. 2020 deliverable provided the framework for many administrative reforms which improved public services, self governance bodies, and revitalised public trust in institutions (Ibid, 2021). Furthermore, in the field of energy, Georgia has proven eager to partake in the EU-funded Energy Community, and liberalise its internal energy market following EU standards. Pipelines projects like the TANAP and TAP showcase the fruits of such a partnership, which beyond clear economic interests on the EU side, also offer Georgia diversification from the Russian markets (Chitadze, 2019). Ultimately, public awareness of HT has grown through the viable work of many NGOs and civil society initiatives funded by the EU and its Atlantic partners, advocating from expansion of civil and social rights, as well as judiciary reform for the upholding of the rule of law (Darchiashvili et al., 2019). The results of such work is also observable in the overwhelming support for NATO and the EU recorded in Georgia over time, floating consistently at between 70% and 80% since 2018 (Ibid, 2019).

However, as the frequency and capacity of hybrid threats continues to evolve in Georgia, a number of shortcomings and difficulties have been registered too. The reasons behind these are numerous, spacing from the limitations of European soft power tools to Georgia's own bad governance (Kakachia et al., 2021). Firstly, the responsibility over the countering of HTs remains fragmented. Authority is in fact subdivided between the Ministry of Internal affairs, for terrorism and critical infrastructure; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for communications and propaganda; and the Ministry of Defence, for what are defined as security threats (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). The confusion that results is indicative of Georgia's failures to collectively identify hybrid threats for what they are. In fact, as a national strategy against HTs still lacks, different ministries treat each instance on its own rather than a tool of wider scopes (Kakachia et al., 2021). Furthermore, continued trouble upholding the rule of law also shake the public confidence, and opens the door to hybrid threats on the judiciary. The legal basis for countering hybrid threats are in fact vaguely distributed amongst different actors, and despite a somewhat coherent division of competences, the framework remains inadequate (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). This contributed to Freedom House Index's assessments of Georgia as a "only party free nation" (Chitadze, 2019). Lastly, on the unconventional warfare subject, Russia continues to occupy around 20% of Georgia's national territory, leaving the possibility for new violent conflicts in light of the unfolding war in Ukraine (Kakachia et al., 2021).

Overall the country of Georgia offers fascinating evidence to this report's case on soft power, as it showcases results intrinsic to the capability-expectations gap. European efforts to aid the Georgian economy and deal with internal risks have proven to be effective, stemming cooperation and resilience building. While still underdeveloped, critical infrastructure and cyber areas of the state are today sufficiently equipped to withhold against hybrid threats and recover swiftly (Kakachia et al., 2021). However, the inability of EU soft power to tackle external risks facing Georgia is registered too. Already in 2008 Europe showed no credible capacity of preventing the war, nor of guaranteeing a favourable outcome for Tbilisi, and it seems that little has changed today on that front (Ibid et al., 2021). The necessity



to back soft power with hard power is especially relevant in this case, considering the history of Georgia and its long lasting relationship with external, military mighty actors like Russia (Nielsen, 2013).

## 7.3 Ukraine

The country of Ukraine is perhaps the most contemporary and rampant case for combating hybrid threats. The history of Russian interference and gradual expansion of non-linear warfare is best identified by the 2014 events resulting in the annexation of Crimea, eventually resulting in the full scale conflict unfolding at the time of writing (Jasper, 2023). The very concept of hybrid threats gained prominence as a consequence of 2014 due to its widespread usage when compared to previous Russian campaigns in Chechnya and Georgia (Renz, 2016). Those events were closely linked to Ukraine's own aspirations towards the West, and its society's growing preferences for European integration. In fact, the Maidan protests, soon to become the "Orange revolution" took place after the government of pro-Russian Yanukovich stroke down an Association Agreement with the EU in late 2013 (Dobrzanska, 2014).

### 7.3.1 Background and Hybrid threats

The country, part of the ENP since 2004, signing an action plan to brought it closer to the EU, before officially joining the EaP in 2009 (Ibid, 2014). Nonetheless, Ukraine's partnership with the EU dates back to 1993 when an official foreign policy direction document had already expressed the country's ultimate desire to request membership to the then European Communities (Dobrzanska, 2014). The difficulties and violence that followed in the last decade since 2014 is but a consequence of the clash between post-soviet western integration versus traditional Russian ideologies and attitude towards Ukraine. While by no means the national consensus, President Putin has longed believed Ukraine to be a puppet state created in the 19th century by the Austrians to undermine those who Putin describes as Little Russians (Kuzio, 2022). This unconventional wisdom dates back to some critics of Soviet Leader Lenin, and continue to view the country not only as a legitimate area of influence, but indeed as part of Russia altogether. Secondly, the ideology implies a necessity for Moscow to prevent losing the Ukraine to the West at all costs (Ibid, 2022).

This has resulted in a well-sustained effort to expand any potential means of the Kremlin to sway Kiev back into its sphere, originally pushing soft power tactics that over time shifted into hybrid threats (Darchiashvili et al., 2019) and finally fully fledged warfare. This gradual shift is largely due to the success of hybrid operations, which since Crimea convened the Russian leadership of its effectiveness. Indeed the West, and especially the EU was seemingly powerless against these evolving HTs, and Moscow believed to have found a new way to fight European integration in the East (Renz, 2016). Since 2014, the most frequent tactics included powerful cyber attacks on Ukrainian power grids (Polityuk, 2022), economic preferential regimes imposing tariffs, and widespread propaganda (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). The latter was especially expanded into a series of disinformation campaigns targeting different recipients. Firstly, Russian citizens themselves are targeted with political messaging discrediting Ukraine's government, and spreading falsities about the country's backwardness. The efficiency of these is best showcased by the predominantly accepted view in Russia that the Ukrainian situation since 2014 is no more than a civil war between Russian and Ukrainian speakers ((Kuzio, 2022). Secondly, Ukrainians are subjected to heady pro-Russian and anti-Western

propaganda, followed by the re-framing of words like PEACE to imply solely a situation where Ukraine gives up and adhere to Russia's preferred status quo. Lastly, messages spreading in Western Europe and America continue to exaggerate Ukraine's backwardness and corruption, also via celebrities and Western political leaders as indirect spokespersons (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). Russian and Belarusian broadcasting channels only increased in scope with the beginning of the war in 2022, posing as independent outlets (Jasper, 2023). Irregular warfare also plays an important role of course, supplying separatist groups with 120 armoured vehicles, 30 tanks, and more than 1200 soldiers trained in Russia already in 2017 (Balaban, 2017). The efforts of Moscow in this regard were largely sustained by the Wagner group, often delegated by the Kremlin to operate abroad. So much so that the group was even tasked with an assassination attempt on Ukrainian President Zelensky in the early phases of the war.<sup>32</sup> Most recently, the Cyber and information space are those most threatened by Russian HTs, with attacks on Microsoft and Ukrainian government agencies (Karmanau, 2022).

### 7.3.2 Counter-measures and the EU

Especially since 2014 Ukraine has attempted to develop mechanisms against hybrid threats. However, it has been a slow moving process, characterised by low impact measures and the lack of a legal framework (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). The role of the European Union has become increasingly relevant against HTs as of 2015, when, under EU-backed decentralisation reforms, improvements in governance started to surface. These included positive developments in local democratic procedures, and improved trust in institutions (Romanova et al., 2019). 20for2020 also benefited the country in terms of improving resilience and awareness with administrative reforms and public services (Kakachia et al., 2021). Addressing conflict management and security however was barely referred to before 2020, highlighting a shortcoming by the European Council and other EU bodies to stress the importance of building cooperation networks with Ukraine (European Commission, 2021). This was nonetheless partially overcome in recent years with peace initiatives, monitoring missions, and sanctions (Kakachia et al., 2021). Consequently, domestic resilience has grown into a sustainable framework able to withhold against some risks of governance breakdown, especially in the area cyberspace. There, the EU helped deploy Lithuania-led cyber rapid response teams, and streamline collective efforts with experts from Croatia, Poland, Romania, and other EU countries.<sup>33</sup> Domestic efforts in the area also allowed Ukraine to develop its own IT army, made out of hackers and specialists; coordinated by a national cybersecurity agency (Jasper, 2023). Early waning and rapid reaction systems have pushed for stronger international cooperation, despite it being still largely bilaterally with NATO (Parkes, 2024).

What transpires from these developments is of dual nature. On the one hand, European soft power and its tools have made widely recognised progress in social and state resilience, attempting to protect Ukraine's democracy and incentivise its economic developments, highlighted by its preferential channel into the Single Market (Quaglia, & Verdun, 2024). Most lately, Ukraine's official entrance in negotiations with the EU for accession also provides evidence to the positive results in its domestic governance and administration (Rabinovych, & Pintsch, 2024). However, on the other hand, EU capacities against external risks have shown little progress. There Ukraine's resilience proved limited in scope and framework, with multiple ministries tackling HTs without much coordination and legal action. Especially against Russian violent actions, Ukraine and the EU did not satisfy the expectations, and, similarly to the case of

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<sup>32</sup> See <https://tdhj.org/blog/post/russia-ukraine-hybrid-warfare/> and <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1758-5899.13257>

<sup>33</sup> Full story by Tidy, J. (2022) "Ukraine: EU deploys cyber rapid-response team," BBC News, February 22, 2022.

Georgia, did not succeed in creating a functional deterrence in the form of preventive resilience (Kakachia et al, 2021). In the information sphere, similar failures are highlighted. The lack of a wider media strategy has done little to fight disinformation, and the responsible agencies have only gone as far as to ban some Russian owned outlets (Gogolashvili et al., 2019). Even to that end, the issue does not seem to be resolved, as Russian informational warfare seemed to have shifted into indirect partnership with Ukrainian-owned channels paid to spread Moscow's disinformation. Troll factories and bots continue to operate under false accounts, often pretending to be Ukrainian ministries and its military. (Parkes, 2024). Ultimately, malign tactics in the sphere of religion, with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church responding to its Russian counterpart, continue to politicise religious messaging and promote Russian intelligence (ibid, 2024).

Altogether, Ukraine's unique experience with hybrid threats showcases a clear example of just how damaging and systematically malign these types of warfare can be (Parkes, 2024). Most interestingly, it represents the capacity of these cross-sectoral tools to compliment both military and non-military objectives over long period of times, despite the fast improving efforts of NATO and the EU to develop strategies against HTs. Once again, it is also notable how democratic reforms function as fundamental building blocs for any society to develop resilience and awareness against hybrid threats, over which European soft power has proven partially successful. While by no means sufficient, progress is observable when analysing the pre-2014 conditions of state institutions and public trust in Ukraine vis a vis those of today.

## CHAPTER 8: SOFT POWER AND HYBRID THREATS

As it has been showcased by the previous chapter and its case studies, the two elements of European soft power and hybrid threats are two broad concepts that encapsulate countless areas of policy, society, and economics. The ways in which they manifest can be more or less explicit, and so can their consequences for their targets/recipients. Amazingly so, these are nothing but two limited fields of research within the much wider spheres of European foreign and security policy. Nonetheless, as mentioned by this report, the ways in which soft power and hybrid threats interact, especially within the Eastern Partnership, can be a powerful yardstick (Hill, 1997) for measuring larger concepts and the overall progress made by the EU in the CFSP vis a vis the challenges the latter faces. The way to do so may not offer specific calculations nor quantitative data, but it is however indicative of progress, and CEG functions as an effective tool for addressing where we stand (1993).

### 8.1 The Capability-Expectations Gap

Measuring the gap (CEG) is instrumental for this analysis to understand the overall behavioural evolution of European soft power in the EaP against hybrid threats. It is done by evaluating the discrepancy between the expectations of European security goals in fighting HTs and the (limited) capabilities of the EU, via its soft power, to implement and enforce those actions for the achievement of such objectives (1993). The information gathered throughout this research are plenty to calculate both EU goals and means, despite their incapability to consider all possible variables. To compensate for this shortcoming, the study offers both a case study and an interview analysis, as to ensure circumstance-specific evidence, as well as the public opinion of experts and citizens. These are taken as evidence of a qualitative nature, and contribute to the state of (perceived) existence of both capabilities and expectations of the gap. What emerges from such a procedure is that measuring the CEG cannot be done under the most conventional schools of thought on EU foreign policy, such as the rationalist realism-intergovernmental school, or the constructivist normative-structural power school. This is because both take a highly theoretical approach understanding to what is often a mixture of actions and initiatives subjected to local communities and on-the-ground circumstances (Ekengren, 2018). In fact, the empirical realities of EU foreign policy is best measured when assessing area specific situations, over a medium-to-long period of time. This means that a study on such a concept requires both rationalist and constructivist perspectives, merging the schools of thought into something new.

#### 8.1.1 Practice theory

That something new can be expressed in many ways, more or less similar to what is known as practice theory. This is considered as a valuable way to analyse *specific forms of human agency residing in communities of like-minded professionals whose repeated, identifiable actions result in practices from which explanatory tools can be derived and conclusions can be generalized* (Economides, 2019). This can be incorporated into the CEG as the theory offers a potential way to restructure the discourse on EU foreign policy, as it focuses on practical work, local concerns and initiatives, as well as the developments these provoke over time (Ekengren, 2018). These can be observed as *socially meaningful patterns of actions* (Bicchi & Bremberg, 2016), highlighting the importance of practice as a form of action taken by individuals and groups for the achievement of collective goals (Bicchi, 2021). The emphasis on practice theory

is therefore on commitments vis a vis direct actions of agents, responsible entities, as well as the multiplicity of realities (Bueger, & Gadinger, 2018). Upon this research, the commitments are of course those of the EU to counter HT, while the actions are assessed as the overall politics and initiatives taken by the EU, or through the EU by local governments in the case studies. The process is furthered complimented by the experiment of the interviewees and the knowledge of experts, taken from the interview analysis offered below.

However, the usage of practice theory is limited in this report as it mostly accounts for local action. This is not sufficient for calculating the wider role of EU expectations, as that implies an exploration of Brussels' discourse and legislations, discussed above. The gap this study strikes to measure is that between wide discourses and narrow actions, rendering practice theory solely useful for the latter. It is in any case a remarkable addition to the framework, further expressed in 8.2.

### 8.1.2 Scope and limitations

Hill himself quickly came to the conclusion in 1997 that overcoming the gap was not necessarily the objective of its model, first introduced in 1993 (1997). The yardstick analogy via which he and later Nielsen envisioned CEG as, meant utilising the latter for an over time evaluation of EU foreign policy concepts. It is not necessarily something to overcome, despite the fact that, at least theoretically, the final purpose should be that of resolving the discrepancies in the attempt to reconcile capabilities and expectations (Nielsen, 2013). Therefore, for the sake of understanding the ideological purpose behind this gap, a brief elaboration on its scope is provided.

Overcoming the CEG means closing the gap between capacities and expectations. In this report that would entail a situation in which, according to the fourth model offered in 3.3.1, the goals of the European Union against the spread of hybrid threats in the EaP are achievable through the soft power tools it possesses. This is theoretically done by either expanding EU capabilities or reducing its expectations (Hill, 1993). The first implies a series of political reforms and military build up that would render EU soft power more credible, effective and capable of manoeuvring access the EaP (Nielsen, 2013). The arguments for doing so often revolves around the necessity for soft power to be backed by hard power, but unfortunately these also require the EU to possess a kind of influence and authority over the recipient countries that it does not currently possess, nor that it necessarily strikes for (Nye, 2011). Expanding the capabilities remains nevertheless a desirable way to tackle the gap, especially in the field of hybrid threats. This is due to the complex cross-sectoral nature of HTs, ever requiring the EU and its partners for additional financial and human resources (Stefan, 2023). Differently, the second method to overcome the CEG considers reducing the expectations. This implies restricting the internal aspirations of EU bodies and legislation, hence lowering what they profess to strike for in the EaP against hybrid threats (Nielsen, 2013). Arguments for doing so envision a more restricted EU foreign policy, likely to be less supranational, capable of showcasing successful achievement over those expectations that remain. While functional, this would mean to go against most international organisations's inherent tendencies to offer well-meaning and desirable promises, over which most of EU enlargement, CFSP, and EaP stand on (Hill, 1997). Contemporary debates on the CEG often agree on the ultimate necessity to strike a balance between the two methods, realising that neither is likely to close the gap, while both can steer in that direction for its narrowing (Nielsen, 2013).

Some limitations, as previously mentioned, are highlighted. These contribute to the reasoning behind the CEG impossibility to fully disappear. Most notably, the risks of over commitment and under fulfilment are observed. In the case of European soft power, this is characterised by the limited scope of EU actorness, as well as the constrained legitimacy of action given agencies like the EEAS (CEPS, 2021). Consequently, another limitation may imply the risks

associated with the creation of false promises both within and beyond the EU for third parties. These are best showcased by the failures to incorporate countries like Georgia and Ukraine to the EU after the 2004 enlargement, when EU promises seemed to suggest that those actions were well under way and close to completion (Nielsen, 2013). Lastly, and more ideologically, the contrast between what the public think the EU should do vis a vis what it can do offers some insights on yet another limitation of the CEG (Hill, 1997). To this point, the interview analysis that follows in 8.2 presents some evidence. Finally though, despite these risks, the CEG remains capable of testing both capabilities and expectations for the elaboration of recommendations, which appear below based on the resulting model of understanding and its implications.

## 8.2 The Spectrum of Perspectives:

The purpose of this section is to provide a more grounded understanding of hybrid threats in the EaP as well as the role of European soft power. To do so, the following offers a rundown of the data gathered throughout an interview process featuring several individuals from the public and private world. The conversations with the author provide this research with in-depth evidence on the scope, targets, and implications of HTs for some EaP citizens, who have been kind enough to partake and offer some personal examples from their first hand experience growing up in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. On the other hand, some interviews feature discussions with experts and public officials from EU agencies like the EEAS as to expand on the practical realities behind EU security goals and its usage of soft power. Ultimately, both samples are asked to share their thoughts on both bodies of work, along with personal comments and recommendations. The opinions of these individuals contributes to this report's analysis in two ways. First, they provide yet more evidence to answering the research questions and the scope of the report. And secondly, they showcase the degree of sympathy/antipathy to which European soft power and hybrid threats are upheld to, understanding that the public perception over these directly influences their reach and effectiveness.

This interview analysis is presented in the following way. The structure is subdivided into five sections, respectively: EU soft power; hybrid threats; EU wider goals; the gap between ends and means; and recommendations. Each area is explored through the experience and comments of the respondents, including direct quotes and specific instances. Some of the comments may be off the record, and are therefore cited as anonymous. Most of the data is nonetheless made public and the full transcripts can be found in the Annex.

### 8.2.1 Interviews with EU officials, analysts and EaP citizens

The first section of this analysis focuses on the role of European soft power.

“The EU is such an attractive model that the fantastic thing about its soft power is that it possesses it even without doing anything” (Fell, 2024).

The key words in this sections recurrently revolved around the relevance and effectiveness of European soft power. The former is due to its value-based attractiveness, especially in the field of democracy and liberal values. “Shared values of European identities [...] of our history and culture” (Donets, 2024) are fundamental for the reach of

European soft power, says one Ukrainian, later stating that for it to work the two blocs must align in terms of values. Moreover, one Moldovan citizen suggests these are relevant even for those societies that do not necessarily share them, but simply “show an interest in them” (Sanduleac, 2024). This means that even in countries where concepts or democracies may not be well established yet, the desire to achieve them is enough to let European soft power in. The reach of which is all the more important for those societies where it “may be harder to reach out to different parts of the population” (Drucec, 2024). The phenomenon is also normalised by some, as a “natural component of any society’s external policy” (Iatisin, 2024), and an “important driver of foreign policy” (Nanca, 2024) in the case of the EU. However, it is the way in which soft power is exerted that makes it assume positive or negative connotations. For these to be positive a major component is perceived as that of “non-violent tools” (Kulyniak, 2024). Specific examples of these are often seen as offering EaP Countries “a more comprehensive way into the EU accession process” (Svianadze, 2024), or instruments that fight disinformation and other hybrid threats as if “Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine were already part of the Union” (Svianadze, 2024). Differently, what is not desired are instances where the EU “shows up at your door and harshly says ‘here is democracy, take it now!’” (Sanduleac, 2024), reminding that is a fine line between incentivising and pressing. Consequently, accordingly to the non-violent, incentive-based approach, it is no surprise to hear from academics like Fiott that “the EU should, in a sense, renounce to military and hard power, and focus a bit more on it can effectively use its economic and diplomatic power” (Fiott, 2024). Indeed most of the interviewees perceived soft power as a “effective mechanism which works” (Natradze, 2024), despite their different stand point over what exactly makes it effective. While Fiott offers to move away from hard power, others, like Giles, Fellow at Chatham House London, suggests the opposite. “Soft power is not sufficient to counter exploitation and threats” (Giles, 2024) he says, moving on to critic the mismatch between European values and the pragmatic realities of geopolitics. Others, like one Georgian, highlight the role of economics as “the biggest way to influence EaP countries and go into the EU” (Natradze, 2024). The effectiveness of which also depends on the recipient of course, as pointed out by one Moldovan, while considering that “in some areas it might not work” (Drucec, 2024) depending on the willingness of local state institutions too.

The second section focuses the role of hybrid threats.

“Hybrid threats are not new whatsoever. They were part of, I would say, comprehensive exercise of power by both sides... under the threshold of war.” (Fiott, 2024).

Whatever confusion and inconsistencies may be seen on the role of soft power, there is not when it comes to hybrid threats, especially within the EaP. Indeed all interviewees agree on the high frequency and relevance of HTs there, suggesting they “affect regular people, and influence governance” (Donets, 2024). Examples of these are “economics and in the field of energy” (Sanduleac, 2024), where fluctuating gas prices by Russian backed companies are used as leverage; “masses of ‘protesters’ in Moldova paid by Russian oligarchs to spread pro-Russian messages” (Iatisin, 2024); “suppressing the democratic opposition” (Natradze, 2024) in Georgia; and “Disinformation campaigns In Ukraine” (Donets, 2024). Throughout all these, an extraordinary number of evidence shows that Russia is almost always perceived as the sole actor behind hybrid threats, since the latter “[Russia] has been at war with the West in every domain except open conflict” (Giles, 2024). Russia is also accused of utilising these tactics, in places like Moldova, to “maintain its influence” (Drucec, 2024) and de-legitimise the national government. Examples of these are seen especially in the breakaway regions of Transnistria, where Russia attempts to portray the central government as an occupier, spreading fake news saying that the then candidate for President “Sandu would bring in 30.000 Syrians if elected” (Ibid, 2024). Also notably, all the interviews offer data to the perceived increase in both the frequency of hybrid threats, as well as in the “sharpness and aggressiveness” (Nanca, 2024) of the tactics. These in fact increasingly encompass “unconventional warfare tactics... and direct support to militias” (Kulyniak, 2024) says one Ukrainian.

However, as these tactics are “not new at all” (Fell, 2024), the measures to counter HTs at the EU level remain “relative new policy areas” unfortunately (Ibid, 2024). The uncertainty over precise policy recommendations and EU-NATO cooperation, says Fiott (2024), complicate the ways in which actors can counter these threats, often due to the shape shifting behaviours of HTs. An example of these is offered in the case of the 2014 annexation of Crimea, where Russia shifted its tactics from cyber attacks to disinformation and then military action, reducing EU and NATO capabilities to respond effectively (Fiott, 2024). Another issue is that of internal legitimacy, where the EU is accused of not possessing those “inbuilt capabilities to spread expertise” (Giles, 2024) that it offers to share. Once again, country-specific circumstances and willingness to act are to keep in mind, as a Georgian citizen points out, since refusing to build the necessary resilience leads to destabilising instances like the “foreign agent law” that was recently passed in Tbilisi (Svianadze, 2024). Ultimately, the challenge of countering HTs is due to the limited willingness and capacity of the EU itself to associate the tactics to the actors that spread them, making the Union’s response “actor agnostic” as mentioned by Fell (2024).

Thirdly, this section focuses on the EU wider goals.

"It's for each member state to decide how best to deal with this problem. And then at the EU level, we can support member states and offer best practice policy solutions." (Fell, 2024).

This area considers the wider strategies and framework within which the EU attempts to counter hybrid threats with its soft power. As a consequence of the creation of the Eastern Partnership and the subsequent conflicts in the region, EU goals have “shifted towards security’s rather than economics” (Donets, 2024), says a Ukrainian, highlight the shifting nature of European strategies. Signs of progress have followed in the form of defence treaties and increased awareness, also visible when observing the “increased investments in national security budgets” (Iatisin, 2024) in places like Moldova. These however underscore what is seen by many as a major roadblock in EU wider security goals, as most of its efforts inherently rely on national resilience. As Giles highlights, positioning most objectives on the back of the EaP, traditionally defined for cooperative relationships, “are not valid for the geopolitical confrontation against hybrid threats” (2024), meaning that constructing defence mandates with EaP countries are hindered by the limited scope of such a relationship. “Too long we have insisted on soft power alone without treating the much sharper sides of our competitors” says an EEAS official (Nanca, 2024). Somewhat similarly, others agree on this point, adding that the “intensification of capabilities” (Fiott, 2024) within the EU might not be backed by sufficient legitimacy on the side of expectations. However, the very decentralised nature of this framework offers the line over which EU soft power walks best, says an EEAS official, adding that the Union’s role is supportive, not prescriptive. “Its for each member state to decide how best to deal with this problem” (Fell, 2024), remarking the incentive-based rather than coercive-based nature of European soft power in the EaP. This is often used to justify why European goals often remain broad, as not to appear overbearing in the eyes of EaP countries. An example of this is to be found in Africa, where commonplace sayings among some communities hail China’s soft power as that of someone who is there to “build bridges, while the EU wants to monitor our elections” (Nielsen, 20113). Arguably, “steps in the right direction” are made possible by such a framework, says a Moldovan citizen, despite but also in light of what the local community wants (Iatisin, 2024). For example, still in Moldova, EU-based objectives towards the rule of law have resulted in a local effort to strengthen the vetting process of judges and prosecutors. “You either accept the vetting process or, if you decide to leave, you are not gonna have the easiest way out of it” says one citizen in favour of such development (Drucec, 2024). Finally, the value of enlargement remain as a core underlining goal for the EaP countries, which indirectly pushes countries like Georgia “to be part of the EU and far from Russia” (Natradsze, 2024).



Fourthly, this section explores the gap between European ends, in countering hybrid threats, and its soft power means.

"I think the gap has narrowed, but I think as much as it is narrowing down, it can also expand more... it is dangerous territory... you have to adapt constantly." (Iatisin, 2024).

Calculating whereas the means meet the ends is difficult for individuals to assess over a conversation, despite the relative knowledge and experience they may have on the subject on hybrid threads and soft power. However, the trends that result out each answer remains suggestive and indicative wider public perceptions, constituting desirable data that is ultimately gathered. Interestingly, based on the four models of the CEG, most interviewees suggested that the gap is narrowing, with a Georgian citizen even stating that "if they [the EU] keep going at this pace, the gap will definitely close down" (Natradsze, 2024). "I see that now they [the EU] can handle more and more... soft power has its place in this progress" (Kulyniak, 2024) says one Ukrainian. This is also suggested by some officials who "look at the EU and the capabilities that we have to counter hybrid threats" seeing "certain instruments which we can use to support other member states and build resilience against hybrid threats" (Fell, 20024), suggesting that this by itself is evidence of progress made since 2009. Nonetheless, many remain skeptical of it ever closing down, due to external pressures and evolving threats. Tailored approaches to address different requirements of EaP nations are relevant to this point too, as highlighted by one Moldovan citizen who reportedly feared the limitations of the EU "one fit all" solutions (Sanduleac, 2024). Adaptive strategies to bridge the gap are needed to meet security goals, as the gap is otherwise likely to stay the same or even "look wider" (Donets, 2024) says one Ukrainian. This underscores a commonplace trend calling for the balancing of ambitious goals with realistic means, as suggested by one Moldovan citizen (Sanduleac, 2024).

What results from these comments is a number of interviewees that continue to perceive the gap as the same as it was in 2009. "People become more and more resilient.. they know how to react" (Kulyniak, 2024), but new threats continue to emerge, resulting in a gap that "is moving, but like, from both parts" (Drucec, 2024). Much of this movement inherently depends on getting the "right expertise"(Fiott, 2024) and backing it with "the right resources" (ibid, 2024) says one expert, considering the increased efforts in the legislative advancement vis a vis the physical implementation of security measures, which still lag behind. Some evidence to the gap remaining the same is justified by the diversification of the toolbox, argued to be used to manage the rising levels of hybrid threats rather than prevent them (Nanca, 2024). "We have to admit that the capabilities that the EU has are limited compared to the scope of threat" says one EEAS official (Fell, 2024). Finally, one respondent referred to the gap itself as a "pretence" (Giles, 2024), suggesting that EU could only pretend to uphold its stated aspirations of security and stability prior the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022. Examples of these can be found in the monitoring vs action mechanisms of the EU, says Giles, suggesting that these missions "They document, they report, then what, if there is no possibility of actually acting on what the find, then the utility is slightly limited" (2024).

This fifth, and last, section focuses on the recommendations offered by the participants.

"We must stay ahead of the curve. This means constantly updating our strategies and tools to effectively counter hybrid threats as they evolve." (Fell, 2024).

Recommendations on the way forward vary throughout this document analysis, largely based on the experience of the interviewee. Traditionally, recommendations consider expanding the means or reducing the goals, as to attempt at closing the gap. It is no surprise that all EaP citizens believe in the necessity to further expand the means of European soft power against hybrid threats, with one Moldovan advocating for more tangible benefits in the field of education and economic opportunities "to counter Russian disinformation more effectively" (Iatisin, 2024). Others, like

a Georgian, offers to reconsider the motives that drive their country's desire to integrate with the EU, suggesting that while economics matter, the most important thing is "that we want to be part of the European Union" (Natradze, 2024). To do so, one Moldovan considers expanding "campaigns from the EU to highlight the benefits of being part of the European Family" (Iatisin, 2024). Overall, more than one interviewee from the EaP stresses the need to move away from one fix all mechanisms and instead focus on "individually tailored approaches to each country" (Sanduleac, 2024). Nonetheless there is also an overall agreement on expanding multilateral dialogue and increasing cooperation mechanisms amongst EaP countries and the EU, realising that comprehensive new strategies to counter hybrid threats require shared intelligence and multilevel platforms of discussion (Svianadze, 2024). However, the expansion of means per se is not enough. "We need to expand our tools while focusing on achievable goals. Optimism is good, but we need to plan for different scenarios" (Donets, 2024), says one Ukrainian. "Align your ambition with what you are actually willing to implement" says Giles, advocating for a total reconsideration of EU goals in the area (2024). To back up his point he considers the experience of NATO over the same challenges in the EaP, which ultimately made its official "decide that it was somebody else's problem" (Giles, 2024). Reducing the goals is also considered by another EEAS official, who says "its unrealistic to assume that these countries will join the EU in the foreseeable future" (Nanca, 2024). However, as highlighted by one Georgian citizen, the risks of publicly scaling back the goals of the EU in this field are troublesome, as its soft power would be reduced as a consequence of it, especially in those counties of the EaP whose faith in the EU is already shaken by Russia's HTs (Svianadze, 2024). "Try to find a new way to increase means and also our goals" he suggests (Ibid, 2024). A possible way to do so could be to look at the experience of countries like Romania, learn from their gains since accessing the EU, and utilising such lessons to continue offering EaP countries a level of ambition that preserves EU engagement and incentivises collective efforts against hybrid threats (Nanca, 2024).

More achievable goals depends on various actors, and often begin in Brussels with viable policy objectives and respectable time frames of action. On the ground instead, the first step in this area is seen as that of offering EaP citizens "better communication in terms of goals, so that everyone is on the same page" (Drucec, 2024). In doing so a big part comes down to what EU backed tools and agencies can do. Some, including Fiott advocates for a more centralised, issue-specific, policy towards countering hybrid threats, to be "complimented by dedicated bodies, similar to the Hybrid Fusion Cell, focused on funding and resources" (2024). Hybrid risk surveys and international cooperation further expand EU and EaP capabilities to understand HTs, before offering action (Fell, 2024). The process of implementing and maintaining the EU hybrid toolbox is still unfolding, and continued support for it is essential to both the perception and the practical efficiency of it on the ground (Ibid, 2024). Ultimately, "more diversification of the hybrid toolbox is needed to provide European Member States themselves with tools" that they can use and share with their partners in the East (Nanca, 2024).

### 8.3. Role of Soft Power in Combating Hybrid Threats

The role of European soft power in countering hybrid threats is investigated extensively throughout this research. The long term objectives of Brussels for the EaP countries have been laid down long ago, while the tools to compliment such actions have struggled to follow up. Recently, in light of the unfolding war in Ukraine, new momentum seems to have sped up the process, with new(er) instruments of the EU Hybrid Toolbox being operationalised (Fell, 2024). Reportedly, the goals of expanding awareness, coordination, and resilience continue to constitute the most viable way to assess the successes and failures of the EU, through the evidence found on the part of

its many tools and the actions taken thus far. In the long term, this relationship strikes to contribute to the positioning of the EU as an indispensable clearing house of Europe's defence (Biscop, 2022), where member states and external partners, like the EaP countries, can pool resources and shared efforts for the maintenance of the defence and security landscape. To do so, the key sentence is that of transitioning *from cooperation to integration* (Biscop, 2022), and even in the field of hybrid threats, this proves to be as true as it is challenging.

### 8.3.1 Case Studies & Interviews

This section offers data to the successes and failures on the role of European soft power in countering hybrid threats in the EaP, based on the evidence gathered by the case studies and interview analysis.

In terms of awareness the EU has undoubtedly made some progress. Coming from a pre-EaP time when concepts of hybrid threats were not even defined by public entities in Brussels, today's scenario is much more promising. The European Commission and other EU bodies have agreed on collective definitions and catalogues of types of HTs, while the EUHT provides the capabilities needed for the detection of those tactics across the EaP (Lasoen, 2022). This is increasingly relevant for both sides. For the EU, it matters as to continue to inform decision makers as extensively as the tools allow on the issue of hybrid threats, to ensure collective understanding and sway away from non-viable expectations. While on the other, the EaP population, it accounts for a whole-of-society approach to information sharing aiming to educate the public, and their local governments, on the challenge they face. This is reflected by the experience of our interview sample, where all interviewees proved to be aware and well informed on hybrid threats, its actors and targets, as well as practical instances of them (Natradze & Drucec, 2024). From our case studies, it emerged that tools like the Hybrid Fusion Cell and EU INTCENT have proven quite proactive in this sense, and offer evidence to the narrowing of the gap in the area of situational awareness (Stefan, 2023). Disinformation early warning systems have flourished as a consequence this, and proven thus far to be effective in detecting and limiting the spread of disinformation within and beyond the Union, including East StratCom for monitoring (Ibid, 2023). However, certain issues remain in the field of awareness, especially on intelligence elaboration. Some fear that the principle of full agreement before taking action is of concern, as it invites consensus mania and groupthink, which in terms incentivises the elaboration of actions that is flawed (Lasoen, 2022).

Secondly, the evolution of coordination is considered. For this, the very existence of the EUHT is self evident. The idea of cross-sectoral, cross-national instruments with international reach to act against hybrid threats offers countless data to the increased amount of cooperation amongst relevant parties (Lasoen, 2022). Most notably, European counter-hybrid response has been shaped to compliment and be compatible to those NATO instruments already in use across the Eastern Flank, as described in 6.3. Joint exercises regular task force meetings between the two is as close as a representation of such increased cooperation as it can be shown (Lasoen, 2022). For these, the European Centre for Excellence (Hybrid CoE) has proven instrumental since its creation in 2016. It has in fact been responsible for organising workshops, gathering reports, and offering simulations between the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and the Political and Security Committee (PSC) on combating HTs to test their responsiveness and cooperation (Stefan, 2023). Moreover, increased cooperation is to be observed also between the EU and EaP nation, even though that is mostly set up as bilateral, rather than featuring tables of discussion featuring more than one EaP nation at a time. Both Moldova and Ukraine have benefited from this closer line of contact with Brussels, which has resulted in shared anti-HTs intelligence and resources, as well as the deepening of economic ties. An example of this being the substantial role

played by Moldova in the facilitation Ukrainian grain export to Western market since the February 2022 war (Stănescu, 2023). However, many continue to highlight the shortcomings in cooperation, more specifically with regard to dialogue amongst EaP nations themselves. The EU has proven effective in constructing channels of communication with each of them, except perhaps with Belarus; but the widespread opinion, also reflected by our interview sample, on escaping the one-fix-all approach have inadvertently slowed down efforts to construct forums of discussion on countering hybrid threats and sharing intelligence (Fiott, 2024) Furthermore, the inherently complex relationship of the EU's own 27 member states has at time slowed down the scope and operationalisation of the EUHT, resulting in bureaucratic impediments, restrictions on the reach of soft power instruments, and generally constituting a setback in that cooperation with EaP Nations where the EU should come across as a united front (Lasoen, 2022).

Ultimately, the area of resilience is discussed. This is particularly difficult to elaborate on due to its vast implications and scope, observable in so many different spheres of society and governance. There the EUHT has played a vital role in identifying early signs of HTs, providing host countries with recovery measures and funds, as well as procedures to strengthen the security of those institutions most vulnerable to hybrid attacks. Its functionality is showcased by efforts of tools such as the cyber diplomacy toolbox, the foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) toolbox, and the hybrid rapid response teams (EURHRT), all discussed in 6.3 (Council of the EU, 2024; Stefan, 2023). Chapter 6.3 has also offered much evidence to the role that EU backed projects, missions, and NGOs have had in strengthening education, good governance, and the rule of law, once more underlined as indirectly fundamental prerequisites for the creation of effective response and recovery mechanisms to HTs (Stefan, 2023). Resilience has been developed in the EaP attempting to cover as many areas of society as possible: from cyber defence, with the Directive on the Security of Network and Information Systems (NIS Directive); to counter-terrorism, with financial support to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) (Olech, 2021); and against disinformation, with countless initiative like InvestEU, EUandME, and EUvsDisinfo (European Parliament, 2021; Stefan, 2023). Nonetheless, a major roadblock on developing resilience is that of responsibility. Meaning who ultimately holds responsibility over building resilience (Giles, 2024). According to article 4 of the EU, and reinstated by the Strategic Compass, the Union does not have legal responsibility on implementing such tools or guaranteeing certain results, which ultimately fall upon the recipient country. The idea is more that of a EUHT that compliments and supports those national efforts to combat hybrid threats, while allowing for more coordination and joint actions across the international sphere (Stefan, 2023). This means that the gap over resilience can narrow or expand largely depending the recipient's willingness and capacity to act upon it, rather than simply by the amount of resources provided by the EU, as showcased by the Foreign Agent law recently passed in Georgia (Natradze, 2024). Moreover, also worthy of mention, is the nature of the hybrid toolbox itself. This in fact remains of a reactive approach, mostly aiming at managing unfolding crises and limiting damage (Lasoen, 2022). A more proactive approach, focused on prevention above all else, would be more likely to fuel social resilience and the limitation of hybrid threats.

Finally, the analysis from this section offers evidence to the current state of the CEG, as it attempted to gather evidence from all relevant fields, backgrounds, and experiences. The case studies provided useful data on tools utilised and societal efforts of citizens of the EaP; while the interview analysis offered more insights on how individuals perceive European soft power and hybrid threats. Altogether, these add to the greater mosaic of understanding these two bodies of work. Upon such evidence, the next chapter elaborates the findings that result, and the recommendations that emerge.

## CHAPTERS 9: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This conclusive section offers an elaboration on the findings of this study, taking in consideration the evidence that emerged from the document and interview analysis. These are presented as to answer the three research subquestions investigated by the study, observable here.

1. *How can EU soft power means and tools counter hybrid threats in the EaP countries of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia?*
2. *To what extent are wider EU security strategic goals in combating hybrid threats met in those EaP countries?*
3. *How are these findings suggestive of European capabilities to achieve its security goals in the EaP ?*

Furthermore, some considerations and recommendations are offered as a contribution to the ongoing debate on hybrid threats and European soft power. Ultimately, some limitations of research are observed in the hopes that future academic endeavours upon such a subject will be provided the tools to further this exploration.

### 9.1 Results of findings

Throughout this research many of the roadblocks and recurring challenges encountered have been linked to one major discourse revolving around hybrid threats; that of their nature. These tactics, now a permanent feature of today's security environment, remain highly secretive, covert, hence hybrid, and continue to operate in relative anonymity (Ratsyborinska, 2022). While their presence is continuously detected across the entirety of the Eastern Partnership, local governments and the European Union have struggled to deal with HTs on almost all accounts. Their definition and collective understanding of the issue keeps on shifting, largely due to technological advancement and political squabbling; the mechanisms of building resilience against such types of warfare, while relatively successful in many areas, continue to be outflanked by new techniques and methods; and the cooperation amongst partners between the EU, NATO and the EaP government, while officially in place, lacks readiness and protocol.

Between 2009 and 2015 the EU did not even recognise the role of hybrid threats in shaping governance and ideology in the EaP. Its first ever mention of the phenomena was in 2016 (European Commission, 2016), only to be followed by strategic reports and missions broadly focused on security and defence. Despite this, major objectives were set out since the 2009 Treaty of Prague for the maintenance of security in the EaP (Council of the European Union, 2017). It was only with the escalation on the part of Russia in terms of hybrid warfare that the European Union truly embraced the notion of *hybrid threat* (Darchiashvili, et al., 2019), and started rolling out programmes and instruments, first of which the European Union Hybrid Toolbox EUHT, specifically made for countering HTs. Economic dependence, terrorism, disinformation, and cyber attacks have since then been reassessed as potentially linked actions, part of wider warfare strategies, to be dealt with through instruments in support of the EaP countries's defence and security frameworks (Stefan, 2023). Consequently, between 2017 and 2024 Europe's neighbours' have witnessed a renewed emphasis on security partnership rather than solely on economic integration. These efforts, substantially guided by the resources of the European Union in the form of its soft power, have come to fruition over a number of areas.

Within the countries of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, the following results have emerged in terms of goals of the EU in countering hybrid threats. Firstly, the Europeanisation process have come to such a stage that it is now

argued to be irreversible, with sustained integration with EU institutions, democratic reform, and economic convergence (Gogolashvili, et al., 2019). All this is further underscored by the social cohesion that has brought local communities and societies in the EaP to not only trust the EU, but to desire its closeness too (Sanduleac, 2024; Donets, 2024). To that end, the objectives of hybrid tactics to weaken EaP's western aspirations have been almost totally nulled. Situational awareness and European soft power have complemented each other to that end, as the expansion of one inherently opens the door for the second too (Fell, 2024). Both cooperation and resilience are also areas that have overall profited from the renewed attention of the EU on hybrid threats, and contributed to the establishment of mechanisms to counter them (Lasoen, 2022). Georgia strengthened its resilience with the creation of new departments within three ministries for tackling hybrid threats (Gogolashvili, et al., 2019). Ukraine and Moldova deepened cooperation by opening official channels of communication for the sharing of intelligence and addressing vulnerabilities, based on the tutelage of the Hybrid CoE and other instruments of the EUHT (Hybrid CoE, 2023). New cyber agencies have been constructed, either subordinated to the Ministry of Economic Development and Digitalisation, as it is in Moldova (Stănescu, 2023), or as an independent body, like in Ukraine (Kulyniak, 2024). The war in Ukraine has only expanded the pre-existing ties with the EU, and not only with Ukraine, which now accounts for around 70% of its exports, but in Georgia and Moldova as well (Stănescu, 2023).

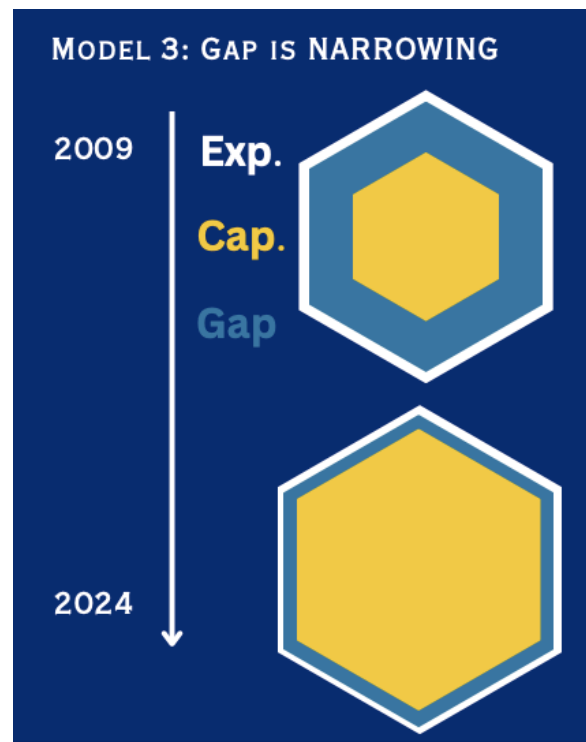
However, many shortcomings have emerged too, all too often linked to the very nature of European soft power. The difficulties with enforcing commitments with concrete policies and actions continue to lie behind EU efforts in the EaP, and especially over areas of defence and security. There the EU's traditional tools of attractiveness based on shared values and economics come to signify less, as the recipient countries find themselves struggling to preserve territorial integrity and national security (Nielsen, 2013). Failure to extend membership prospects has diminished European soft power in the EaP, and despite these recent developments in December 2023, when all three case studies have been offered candidate status (European Commission, 2023), EU attractiveness there was evidently shaken. Showing leadership and fuelling trust means offering viable ways to achieve objectives in reasonable time frames (Landaburu, 2006). Moreover soft power cannot be seen to impose, but rather incentivise (Nielsen, 2013). This very point is what continues to differentiate European soft power from Russian interference in many EaP countries, but walking that line is no easy task. EU-Georgian economic ties have been once decided as patronising asymmetrical partnerships due to over reliance on negative conditionality (Fix, et al., 2019). Against hybrid threats soft power can most definitely be utilised effectively, often acting through civil power sources, but must be reinforced, in the right doses, by hard power too (Nielsen, 2013). It is no surprise that a renewed trust in EU actors in the EaP has followed the strengthening of measures against Moscow which followed the latter's aggression on Ukraine, from which the European Union emerged as a more prominent player in foreign affairs (Fiott, 2024). In Moldova, corruption has been registered once again after years of portraying the country as a champion of European integration, highlighting a discontinuation of EU attention to the issue (Williams, 2019). Ultimately, soft power remains as an asset, a tool for the support of policy. For it to be successful, a given policy must be of sound regime, offering specific means to achieve specific goals, without which soft power is reduced to what Mr Giles of Chatham House defined as "being nice to someone hoping they will be nice to us back" (Giles, 2024). Critics of the EaP once focused on questioning the meaning of this semi-political association, requesting to understand what it all meant for the recipient countries (Duleba, et al., 2013). Since the 2019 the European Union's official response has been that of visualising the Eastern Partnership as undergoing revision and remaining as a live process (Darchiashvili, et al., 2019). While admirable, this broadly scoped definition of the EaP continues to be partially responsible for the shortcomings of European soft power there, most relevantly over areas of security and defence where EU actorsness remains disputed.

### 9.1.1 The Resulting Model (s)

The Capability-Expectations Gap (Hill, 1993) utilised by this report to assess the role of European soft power in countering hybrid threats in the EaP was set to provide this report with an answer to the research question of this study, being: *To what extent does the EU soft power strategy have the capacity to counter hybrid threats in the EaP countries?*, respectively subdivided into the three sub-questions reported above. To do so, a model of understanding was calculated based on the two variables of the capabilities and the expectations of European soft power in countering hybrid threats within the time frame of the EaP itself. Finally, based on the data gathered throughout this report, and amongst the four potentially viable models envisioned, one emerges as the most plausible. The emerging model is N. 3: that of the *gap narrowing*.

Figure 4

This is the case as both the capabilities and the expectations have expanded. However, the former has advanced much faster than the latter, suggesting a relative narrowing of the CEG. Refer to figure 4 for illustration. Reportedly, the scope of wider EU security goals have remained constant in striking for the strengthening of awareness, coordination, and resilience. While the specifics of these objectives have undergone substantial changes and re-framing since 2016 (European Commission, 2016; European Commission, 2018; Council of the European Union, 2022) the overall expectations have not expanded so drastically. On the other hand, the capabilities of the European Union to counter hybrid threats have progressed substantially. The means to tackle hybrid threats grew from merely economic and value-based narratives into full blown instruments and networks, best presented by the EUHT (Stefan, 2023; EEAS, 2024). Those tools have not only ensured the operationalisation of pre-existing policies, but functioned as a driver for continued reassessment and re-elaboration of further action. Their expansion is showcased by the much deeper level of understanding that the EU, and indeed we as the public, have about those once mysterious hybrid warfare tactics. At the same time however, the gap cannot be considered closed since the goals, meaning the expectations, are yet to be met, as highlighted by chapter 9.1. This is due to the following reasons. On the one hand, hybrid warfare is a phenomena that is in continuous evolution, and possesses the capacity to adapt and shift into ever new measures (Olech, 2021). While on the other, European soft power tools remain limited in operationalisation (Giles 2024). This is due to limited nature of the EaP in terms of political cooperation, especially on areas of security and defence, where the EU can act more as a supporter of local government rather than a decision maker (Lasoen, 2022). Ultimately, this means that while efforts to expand capabilities have evidently grown, so has the frequency and nature of hybrid threats, not least because of the advancements made in the digital sphere and cyber warfare. Much of the difficulties here continue to be linked with the relative incapacity of the European Union in the EaP to move beyond response and recovery, and instead invest more in preventing tools (Gogolashvili, et al., 2019). This has been done somewhat effectively in the filed of awareness, but both cooperation and resilience remain substantially lacking



This evidence, together with the content of Chapter 6 and 8, offers to answer the first subquestion on the means and ends of European soft power in the EaP. It proposes much data on the objectives the EU strikes for, as well as on the gradual implementation of the tools and reforms needed to achieve them. Simultaneously, and building on the work

drafted in 8.3.1, the second sub research question is answered too. That is achieved by an investigation on the three main goals of the EU against hybrid threats in the EaP, being that of awareness, coordination, and resilience. The evidence showed substantial success in some areas, and especially in that of awareness. Nonetheless, slower progress and various setbacks are also registered, largely in the sphere of coordination and most notably resilience. Lastly, the third subquestion finds its answer in the representation of the CEG model N.3, which suggests these findings to be of a positive nature in terms of what EU capabilities can achieve in the region against hybrid threats. However, positive reinforcement and the continuous pouring of resources into the same means remain unsuited for the complete achievement of wider EU goals, and hence the closure of the gap.

## 9.2 Policy Recommendations

*“ Just giving Ukraine what it strictly needs to defence itself is NOT enough...  
...We need to give them what they need to defeat Russia.”*

Quote from Richard Shirreff in conversation with author  
Former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe  
GLOBSEC forum on NATO summit, 11 June 2024

Based on the data gathered and the resulting model of understanding that was offered by this report, various recommendations are considered. These concern several areas of discussion, spacing from advice on European soft power; treating hybrid threats; dealing with Russia and other external actors; as well as the EU’s own relationship with partners at NATO and the respective countries of the EaP. For structural purposes, the following are considered into three areas, respectively linked to the scopes of the EU in the EaP against hybrid threats. The purpose of such recommendations is to underscore the existence of alternatives and options that are already at the disposal of relevant actors, and therefore do not aim at reshaping dramatically the environment within which hybrid threats are to be countered.

Firstly, the field of awareness is considered. Somewhat transparently, a preliminary recommendation, already stressed by Gogolashvili et al., suggests to conform the very definition and terminology behind hybrid threats. Different organisations such as NATO, the EU, as well as local governments of MSs and EaP countries should opt for a collective dichotomy of the term, as to ensure that both current and future actions be drafted and enforced cohesively and with consensus. This would be beneficial also in terms of rising the legitimacy of those agencies and bodies responsible for dealing with HTs at different levels of governance (2019). Furthermore, at the local level, NGOs and other national/international organisations should be granted a higher access to government bodies and advisory boards, realising the amount of successes many of them have registered in deterring hybrid threats and shielding local communities (Strelkov, & Samokhvalov, 2022). This has been the case in Georgia and Moldova with NGOs that were staffed by former civil servants and former policy makers, hence retaining the contacts made in government, proved so vital in the years that followed (Ibid, 2022). Situational awareness should also be raised on the subject of vulnerabilities, aiming to highlight those areas of society that are most easily targeted by HTs. Throughout all case studies offered by the report, one commonality has been that of the substantially wider reach of HTs in breakaway regions and semi-autonomous provinces, as exemplified by Transnistria in Moldova or Abkhazia in Georgia (Drucec, 2024; Natradze, 2024). To that and other ends, introducing measurable indicators are reportedly suggested since 2019. These would allow for a better,



and more quantitative, evaluation of those dynamic that shape the security landscapes of the EaP; while at the same time offer the EU and its agents more quantifiable tools to assess their own progress (Gogolashvili, 2019).

Secondly, the area of resilience is discussed. On this subject much remains to be done. As discussed in previous sections, resilience encompasses several areas of governance and society that are ultimately linked to hybrid threats. By reforms, funding, and various projects, a society can ensure better resistance and recovery from HTs, spacing from the economy, politics, culture, and even cyber space. For once, the establishment of national Hybrid Cells for the gathering of more information and data on hybrid attacks is recommended. The European Hybrid Fusion Cell of the EU INTCENT proved highly effective in terms of analysing unfolding attacks, briefing officials, and coordinating quick responses across the neighbourhood (Stefan, 2023). Therefore, whereas each EaP country would establish its own Hybrid Cell, it would effectively empower their national government to learn and develop resistance against context-specific HTs, in real time. Another note is given to the funding and resources given to the countering of HTs. While the European Union finances extensively many of the programmes offered in the ground in Moldova, Georgia, and especially Ukraine (see Chapter 6), it does so on the basis of what is needed to muddle through, all too often calculated on recovery estimates and damage control. In the words of Mr. Shirreff while discussing western funds to Ukraine “just giving Ukraine what it strictly needs to defend itself is not enough [...] we need to give them what they need to defeat Russia” (2024). A similar argument can be made for defeating hybrid threats. While this report does not necessarily suggest that the European Union should unilaterally double down on its financial goals, realising that simply throwing money to the fire does not always mean progress, it underscores the incapacity to achieve certain goals of resilience under the current financial aid system. Overall, a major shortcoming of European soft power in the EaP continues to be its relative incapacity to provide a shield against external risks (Kakachia, et al., 2021). Whereas on the domestic front the EU has supported Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in their economic, political, and social reforms, appealing respectively to its single market, democratic values, and human rights, it continues to lag behind on providing these nations with efficient tools against external risks. These are often associated with the the cyber space, foreign interference on the local media and in the break regions, as well as other tactics, linked to hybrid threats, that were presented throughout this report (Stefan, 202; Darchiashvili, et al., 2019). As the EU strikes for a more political partnership in the EaP, certain steps should be taken, starting from the legal reframing of the Eastern Partnership itself as such. Moreover, in the attempt to raise coordination in terms of security and defence policy, Brussels should reassert its capacity, as well as its wiliness, to commit all required agents, just below the military threshold, to those areas where external resilience spoilers thrive (Kakachia, et al., 2021).

Thirdly, the area of cooperation is considered. The European Union is not alone in this fight against hybrid threats, as the challenge has been registered by many other entities and polities, first of which NATO. Whereas the EU and its soft power remains uniquely fit to tackle HTs thanks to its attractiveness, resources, and value-based partnerships, it unfortunately does not suffice (Darchiashvili, et al., 2019). Good governance, social cohesion and monitoring are excellent building blocs for resilience and awareness spreading. However, they remain incapable of preventing HTs from manifesting in the Eastern flank by themselves. Beyond the traditional backing up of hard power, discussed by Nielsen (2013), increased cooperation must occurred on all level of governance. Risk mitigation techniques must focus more on establishing permanent platforms of coordination amongst stake holders, varying from EaP state institutions, to EU-backed missions and ciivild cociety (Kakachia, et al., 2021). EU CERT and the Hybrid Coe already offer a certain degree of information sharing, but they largely do so amongst themselves, rather than towards EaP countries (Gogolashvili, et al., 2019). Rapid Response Teams are currently being rolled out by the Union in response to those critics accusing its response of being too slow and reactive (Fell, 2024; EEAS, 2024), and are doing so on the basis of its NATO counterparts like NCIRC (Szymanski, 2020). This showcases the capacity and willingness of both actors to learn and develop mechanisms that compliment each other in the search of common foes. Such a

strategy should be expanded to other projects, first of which early warning systems, which are closely related to delivering shift responses to crisis. Joint data bases are also desirable projects worth investing more into, as they allow for more evidence on EaP susceptibilities to HTs to be exchanged amongst NATO, the EU, and the directly concerned EaP nations (Abbott, 2016). Some progress was registered in this area already by 2019, with the creation of the NATO CCDCoE, seen as the counterpart to the Hybrid CoE (Gogolashvili, et al., 2019). Nonetheless it continues to lack an “EaP section” strictly focused on the region. This would be desirable as most of the HTs registered today originate in the EaP, hence functioning as a spawn point from which much could be learned on countering hybrid threats world wide. Ultimately, the EEAS itself should invest in the creation of special liaisons in each EaP country with departments specifically focused on hybrid threats. More centralisation around the issue would help optimise the gathering of data and available actions in each context-specific situation, to be sent upstream towards those larger bodies responsible for coordinating adequate responses. (Anagnostakis, 2023).

More generally, and in conclusion, another policy recommendation would be that of reassessing the scope of European expectations in the region. This report finds that while the goals remain viable, they lack consistency in terms of time tables and procedure. Accordingly it has been visualised how the CEG has observed a gradual narrowing, but does not ultimately envision any closing of the gap. Giles rightfully suggests that such is the case as EU security ambitions do not match operational capabilities (2024). Nonetheless, between the establishment of the EaP in 2009 and nowadays those capacities have expanded beyond most expectations, providing a sound case for digging further into the process. Scaling back expectations to meet operational realities would indeed speed up the closing of the gap, but it most likely would also entail a substantial reduction of European soft power, leaving EaP citizens with disillusionments about the West, lesser support against hybrid threats, and consequently, a return to the Russian umbrella of influence (Svianadze, 2024). Reinforcing coordination, awareness, and most importantly resilience on the other hand, is instead likely to provide the EU and the EaP with better visualisation of hybrid warfare, which in terms, according the know your enemy principle, fuels more viable and consistent expectations in terms of goals (Ratsyborinska, 2022).

### 9.3 Contribution to theory

The theory beyond this research is that of the discourse on the usage of soft power within the security and defence domain. The contribution observable by this study on the subject is substantial. Several points have emerged throughout the research highlighting the positive results of this relationship. Firstly, it has shown the capacity of soft power, and its evolving nature, to tackle cross sectional challenges better than hard power ever could (Tulmets, 2007). Secondly, it remains more cost effective, less wasteful of resources, and more likely to expand partnerships with recipient countries than military intervention (Nielsen, 2013). Thirdly, soft power offers those who yield it correctly, the chance to further their scopes in external relations through attraction rather than coercion, in a diplomatic manner best captured by Nye: “Hard power is about coercing, soft power is about co-opting. [...] Allies are not forced together, but they decide to do so as they share same goals, values and visions, due to their respective attractiveness” (Nye 2004). There has been little disputing on the positive effects that soft, or civilian, or even normative power can have on the economic and social spheres of partnerships, but the same cannot be said in the security landscape. This work humbly offers a contribution to the latter, inviting a reflection on the benefits of linking soft power to security, in a geopolitical architecture where assessing the true costs-to-benefits of a policy requires a cross-sectoral and context based analysis. Finally, no other tool would have satisfied this analysis like the Capability-Expectations Gap (Hill, 1993), reasserting its relevance in the theory surrounding foreign affairs today as much as it did back in 1993. The contribution offered by

this report on the CEG is that of reframing its methodological scope. Differently from Hill, the author has attempted to consider it as a measurement tool, rather than an obstacle to be observed, studied, and overcome.

## 9.4 Limitations of Research

Several limitations are also registered by the author on the content of this study. These are linked to the very nature of the two bodies of work, and the theoretical framework itself. These have made such a research more challenging, and its results less precise than what was hoped.

Firstly, on the matter of hybrid threats, much could be said. The forms that these tactics take on remains in constant evolution, as state and non-state enterprises continue to construct ever more creative and overt ways to assert their influence through hybrid warfare. A renowned book by Thomas Rid called “Active measures” offers a detailed analysis of the history of political and hybrid warfare throughout the Cold War. It showcases many examples of disinformation campaigns and unconventional warfare tactics on the part of the USSR, the US, and other intelligence services in the post-WW2 Europe. The underscored lesson is that each time an effective measure would be discovered and countered, two new ones would proliferate, growing like weeds out of the new defensive mechanism established by the target itself (Rid, 2020). This offers evidence to the discourse on this report’s limitations on the part of HTs, realising that to calculate, learn, and counter such tactics is not only a difficult task, but indeed limited in scope, as one understands the relative incapacity of any actor to completely root them out of the security landscapes altogether. This contributes to the report’s incapability to provide a calculable overview of all HTs which have happened since 2009, hence limiting its capacity to offer quantifiable evidence to the CEG.

The second body of work, that of European soft power, suffers a similar impediment. Its nature is cross sectoral, easy to perceive, but difficult to observe (Nye, 2004). Its results are too often merged into political efforts and/or economic developments that leave no space for it to shine. Most notably, soft power also suffers from codependency. It requires the existence of hard power to survive, as its posture and credibility depend heavily on the latter (Nielsen, 2013). At times soft power acts more effectively than its counterpart, as it is in the case of the EaP, but sometimes, the other way around is true as well, in those circumstances where “hard power for soft purposes” is desired instead (Matlary, 2006). This relationship suggests the following limitations. That soft power is volatile, and highly dependent on internal queries as well as external factors, ultimately linked to the overall posture of the actor that exercises it (Runner, 2008). And that soft power is, like hybrid threats, hard to quantify and chart, once again reinforcing the difficulties for CEG to utilise it as a variable to its representation.

All this evidence adds up to the limitations of the theoretical framework of CEG. Beyond the ones offer already in chapter 8.1.2, the CEG’s largest issue is that of its calculability. As it proposes to address the relationship between ends and means of such complex subjects like foreign affairs, the lack of a quantitative format accounts for a major weakness. This is also escalated by two factors. On the one hand, the unique nature of the European Union as a polity renders the work of CEG all the more challenging (Ekengren, 2018). While on the other, for which the author is responsible, the framing of it as a time-frame measuring instrument provides little help in registering data and elaborating a model of understanding. What emerges is therefore a model of understanding that offers indicative evidence, on a qualitative basis, in this case showcasing an approximative representation of how expectations of EU goals in countering hybrid threats in the EaP relate to European soft power capabilities.



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## DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby certify that this thesis has drafted by me upon my own work and research, unless stated otherwise. The contribution of other individuals have been diligently quoted and acknowledged. All data sets, figures, and tables taken are either created by me, or utilised while acknowledging the work of those who composed them.

Date: July 18th, 2024

Author: Arturo Simone

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Arturo Simone', written in a cursive style.