



Dembińska, M. and Smith, D. (2021) Navigating in-between the EU and Russia. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 62(3), pp. 247-263. (doi: [10.1080/15387216.2021.1932544](https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2021.1932544)).

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Deposited on: 25 June 2021

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Introduction to the Special Issue “Navigating on-between the EU and Russia”
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Navigating in-between the EU and Russia

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Abstract: This Special Issue examines the ways states, regions, de facto states and local actors situated in-between the EU and Russia cope with the competitive external pressure coming from the two regional powers. States, diverse groups and actors in this overlapping neighborhood navigate between varied economic and political integration projects and between different values, ideas and visions of society. This introductory article, first, contextualizes this “inside-out” perspective by presenting the nature of the current EU and Russian projects *vis-à-vis* the region, how they clash and how this puts regional actors in a state of “in-betweenness”. Then, it unpacks the concept of “navigation” by outlining the ways local actors at different levels of domestic governance studied in the contributions to this Special Issue respond to and manage areas of contestation, such as citizenship politics, minority rights, political and trade strategies, and struggles. The role of elite agency serves as a central thread running across the contributions. Caught “in-between” Russia and the EU, domestic actors, be it at national or sub-national level, navigate while adjusting to the external pressures, negotiating and appropriating external discourses. In the process, constraints are often turned into opportunities for the local actors to exploit.

Key words: Eastern Europe; Russia; European Union; regional projects; geopolitics; soft-power; local actors.

The European Union’s eastern members and the neighboring belt of former Soviet republics stretching from Belarus to Azerbaijan today represent a zone of contact between the EU and

Russia, a meeting point between cultures, communities and social spaces. When surveying recent books and articles on this region, titles are suggestive. They evoke Euro-Russia relations in crisis (DeBardeleben and Casier 2018), a divided Europe (Orenstein 2015), competing rationalities (Averre 2009) and confrontation (Huseynov 2016). The “common neighborhood” is depicted as overlapping (Feklyunina 2015), troubled (Popescu and Wilson 2009) or contested (Delcour 2017; Toal 2017). This region is what Gerard Toal defines as a “geopolitical field” comprising “both the sociospatial context of statecraft and the social players, rules, and spatial dynamics constituting the arena” (Toal 2017, 9). It is a field where Russia and the EU apply specific instruments of power (soft power, hybrid power, power of attraction) and where states and diverse groups and actors must navigate between varied economic and political integration projects, and between different values, ideas and visions of society. Looking “inside-out”, this Special Issue examines the ways states, regions, de facto states and local actors “in-between” the EU and Russia cope with the competitive external pressure coming from the two regional actors and how they respond to and manage areas of contestation relating to issues such as citizenship politics, minority rights, and political and trade strategies.

This Introduction contextualizes this “inside-out” perspective by presenting the nature of the current EU and Russian projects *vis-à-vis* the region of study, how they clash and how this puts regional actors in a state of “in-betweenness”. Since the world order is currently in flux and moving in the direction of multipolar competition, it may be that in the future, relations with the EU and Russia no longer become the “only game in town” as far as the current “in-between” countries are concerned. Indeed, some of the articles in this Special Issue point to the United States of America (Morar and Dembińska) and Turkey (Kosienkowski) as actors shaping the calculations of both regional and local players. There is certainly growing interest among EU eastern member states in cultivating closer links with China (Garlick 2019; Matura 2019), which has already become a very active player in the Western Balkans (see the case of Serbia during the Covid-19 pandemic; Šantić and Antić 2020). Already present in Russia’s southern neighborhood in Central Asia, the “One Belt, One Road” Initiative also represents China’s endeavour to build influence (Kaczmarek 2017) in the South Caucasus (Fallahi and Shafiee 2020). However, the literature to date still suggests that - for the moment - the EU and Russia remain far and away the most significant players within the region of our interest.

Once the state of “in-betweenness” is established, we then unpack the concept of “navigation” as it appears in the contributions to this Special Issue: who is doing the “navigating” and to what purpose? What determines the stance taken towards the two competing regional projects and the agency that regional actors can exert? Here we introduce the role of elite agency as a central thread running through the contributions. Notwithstanding the recent developments in elite studies (see Kuus 2020), we follow the common definition of “elites”. Situated in structural processes (Kuus 2019, 164), these (public sector, political, minority or business) elites are “agents of change playing strategic roles in social processes” (Kuus 2020, 6). The focus on the response of elites at different levels is the principal original contribution of this collection, which builds upon the Special Issue edited by Ademmer, Delcour, and Wolczuk and published in this journal in 2016 (vol. 57, issue 1). Ademmer et al. approach the region from the “outside-in”, by examining the nature of the instruments employed by the EU and Russia to influence domestic sectoral reforms and how these instruments affect local actors. The 2016 authors conclude that domestic actors translate and adjust the EU’s and Russia’s policies to the local context and are thus agents of change (or protracted change, as in the case of Ukrainian energy sector reforms; Bayramov and Marusyk 2019). The present Special Issue speaks to this overall finding by analysing local actors playing in the “in-between” field.

The geopolitical field in-between

In order to understand the “outside-in” policies and politics, we need to grasp Brussels’ and Moscow’s perspectives on the region “in-between”. Following Gerard Toal, this perspective is about the EU’s and Russia’s respective geopolitical cultures, their “spatial identities and understandings of their position and mission in the world (...) how [they] see the world, how they spatialize it and strategize about [their] fundamental tasks: security, modernization, the self-preservation of identity” (2017, 10). These geopolitical cultures guide the actions and influences deployed by the two regional powers in the common neighborhood. According to Makarychev and Yatsyk (2017), these strategies, in turn, can be divided into geopolitical and biopolitical tools, aiming respectively at controlling territories and managing populations. As a “field of foreign

policy practice”, geopolitics and biopolitics overlap and create “zones of bio-/geopolitical regulation and control” (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2017, 25).

As suggested by Chausovsky (2015), Russia and the West have always collided militarily, economically and politically in and over this buffer region. Now, “Europe is again a divided continent” (Orenstein 2015, 531); divided between competing geopolitical cultures, a “neo-imperial” EU and a “post-imperial Russia” (Torbakov 2013 quoted in Ademmer, Delcour, and Wolczuk 2016, 3). As some authors argue, whereas Brussels “pursues an under-resourced technocratic neighborhood policy”, Moscow “pursues a well-resourced geopolitical policy that touches raw nerves throughout the neighborhood” (Korosteleva 2010, 1279; Popescu and Wilson 2009). In different ways, both pursue geopolitical and biopolitical goals and tactics.

Outside-in competing geopolitics and regionalisms

On the one hand, given that energy transits the region, the main objective of the EU is to ensure security of and at its eastern border (Huseynov 2016, 77). On the other hand, given the import-export markets, the purpose is to have stable, democratic and prosperous partners, which live under European standards and can buy its products. After eastern enlargements in 2004 and 2007, worried over new dividing lines (Casier 2018, 18), Brussels formulated the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP in 2004), and subsequently the Eastern Partnership (EaP in 2009) specifically designed for non-acceding former Soviet republics (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). By building peace through economic interdependence (DeBadreleben 2018, 119), Brussels pursues a strategy of “circles of influence” made up of the EU as a core area, a close neighborhood, and a far zone of interest (Volovoj 2017). With the specific goal of creating a “ring of friends,” it uses its economic and normative power (or “normative hegemony”, Haukkala 2008; 2010). EaP is guided by the principle of conditionality, which is “a vehicle for promoting democracy and market reform in line with EU values” (DeBardeleben 2018, 120). In the case of post-Euromaidan Ukraine, Wolczuk remarks that the EU “offred [Kyiv] an unprecedented ‘reform stimulus’” by supporting its capacity building even though Ukraine is not an EU candidate state (2019, 737). The EU participates in conflict resolution forums in the case of the Eurasian “frozen conflicts” and pursues seduction strategies of “engagement without recognition” towards de facto states (Cooley and Mitchell 2010) or “trade

as a confidence-building measure in protracted conflicts” (Kemoklidze and Wolff 2020). Conditionality, cooperation and (norm) socialization are the three fundamentals of the EU’s strategy for exerting influence (Delcour 2017, 62).

Russia applies cultural, energy and military power to keep the “near abroad” close. Following what is now known as the “New Monroe Doctrine” (Skak 2010), its neighborhood represents a sphere of influence. Moscow continually reaffirms and warns that it would protect the former Soviet territories in case any geopolitical modification should threaten Russia’s national security there (Huseynov 2016). The Color Revolutions in Georgia (2003) and in Ukraine (2004), were seen “as [a] humiliating signs of Russia’s weakening influence in the post-Soviet neighbourhood” (Saari 2014, 50). The NATO expansion to the east is a particular cause for concern and resentment in Moscow (Orenstein 2015, 532). The 2008 Bucharest Declaration of the NATO summit which encouraged Ukraine’s and Georgia’s NATO membership aspirations was “the moment the ‘near abroads’ of NATO and Russia clashed head on” - the “red line” was crossed (Toal 2017, 7). To regain its influence, Russia’s toolbox includes the whole spectrum of positive (low energy prices or financial assistance) and negative incentives (trade embargos or stirring instability in secessionist territories) (Ademmer, Delcour, and Wolczuk 2016, 10; Saari 2014; Delcour and Wolczuk 2015).

As summed up by DeBardeleben (2018, 124), while “the EU sought security by fostering stability through promoting democratic reform and market integration (...) Russia perceived this approach as encirclement and threat”. While the EU is looking to establish Association Agreements (AA) together with Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA) within the Eastern Partnership, Russia moved from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) towards a Eurasian integration project, establishing first the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU, in 2010), then the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU, in 2015) (Casier 2018, 24). Initially conceived as complementary, Brussels and Moscow are pursuing overlapping regional integration projects that turned into competing strategies. Even though, till the early 2010s, Moscow backed the idea of a “common economic space from Vladivostok to Lisbon” and the EU aspired to an integrated European economic space that would include Russia (DeBardeleben 2018, 120-121), both policies are “read as geopolitical and exclusionary projects” (Casier 2018, 24; Ademmer, Delcour, and

Wolczuk 2016); one being based on liberal political and economic principles, the other on national distinctiveness, equality and (conservative) “sovereign democracy”.

And thus, “the countries located between the enlarged EU and Russia have increasingly become an object of contention and rivalry between Brussels and Moscow” (Haukkala 2015, 27). The zero-sum “competing regionalisms” paradigm (DeBardeleben 2018, 123) came fully into force during the months preceding the EU Vilnius summit of November 2013 where four out of six EaP countries - Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine - were to sign Association Agreements (AA) (Azerbaijan declined the invitation; Belarus was already part of the competing EAEU). “Russia and the EU accused each other of forcing [these countries] to choose their camp” (Casier 2018, 25; Ademmer, Delcour, and Wolczuk 2016). As part of the DCFTA, AAs would undermine the possibility of these countries to integrate with the EAEU in the future, and vice versa. Moscow used its toolbox to prevent AAs coming into force. Other than insisting on the benefits of no-conditions-attached while joining the EAEU, it promised benefits in the form of preferential energy prices. Once these positive incentives were exhausted, the Kremlin imposed trade restrictions and embargos and announced that the countries signing an AA would be excluded from the ECU and from the CIS trade benefits (DeBardeleben 2018, 127-128). While Moldova and Georgia resisted and signed the agreements with the EU, Armenia was dissuaded and joined Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the EAEU instead. As for Ukraine, President Viktor Yanukovich’s last minute refusal to sign the AA unleashed massive pro-European demonstrations, the Euromaidan, followed by Yanukovich’s flight from the country and, *in fine*, Kyiv’s signing of the AA in 2015. For Moscow, Russia was losing Ukraine to the West due to a nationalist coup d’état staged by the West (Casier 2018, 25). A succession of events followed that put Euro-Russian relations into full political confrontation on the ground, namely the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. According to the Russian Eurasianist ideologue, Aleksandr Dugin, these events represented a “geopolitical decomposition of Ukraine (...) an artificial formation, formed by some Russian and Western (Central-European) cultural strata” (Kuzyk 2019, 710).

Outside-in competing biopolitics and soft-power

According to Makarychev and Yatsyk (2017, 36), the annexation of Crimea epitomizes the merger of geopolitical and biopolitical strategies, of “Eurasianism (as a set of mainly geopolitical ideas focused on governing territories) and the Russian World (as an overwhelmingly biopolitical doctrine premised on protecting an imagined trans-territorial community of Russian speakers allegedly sharing a common macro-identity)” (2017, 25). The Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) is imagined as “a family-like organic community vindicating Russia’s civilizational self-sufficiency” (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2020, xiv). Russia’s civilization is constructed as normatively superior vis-à-vis the West and a special responsibility for the people in the post-Soviet space is emphasized (Felyunina 2015, 783). In the “in-between”, this biopolitical project collides with the EU biopolitical projection, which is based on its normative power that promises “a better life for the people” (Cebeci 2017, 66). A *mission civilisatrice* on its own (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2020, 104; Toal 2017, 299). The “civilizational clash” discourse is well illustrated by Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov himself:

[T]wo principal approaches can be observed. First, that the world is gradually, through adoption of Western values, becoming the Greater West. This is a kind of variation on the ‘end of history’ theme. A different approach—and this is what we are promoting—boils down to the fact that competition is becoming genuinely global and acquiring a civilizational dimension, in other words values and developmental models are themselves also becoming the subject of competition. (Lavrov 2008, quoted in Averre 2009, 1698-1699)

Even though Makarychev and Yatsyk (2020, 110) insist on differentiating biopolitics from soft power – the latter referring to “the control over shared meanings and interpretations”, the former to “policies of caretaking” – both aim “to win over the hearts and minds of people in the shared neighbourhood” (Huseynov 2016, 71), to attach/attract them through positive relationships. Both aim at sustaining and expanding a sphere of influence without or in addition to geopolitical and hard-power means (Nye 2004; Huseynov 2016, 73). The tactics are similar. Biopolitical strategies involve “investments as different as language support programs, educational projects, passportization, and religious activities” (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2017, 36); whereas soft power strategies “pursue policies such as [propaganda and public diplomacy] granting foreign aid and economic assistance (...) or organizing cultural or scholarly exchange programmes, etc.” (Huseynov 2016, 73). Referring to the common neighborhood, Popescu and Wilson remark that “Europeans have failed to cultivate their soft power while the Russians have worked effectively to consolidate theirs” (2009, 4).

Together with economic globalization, the prospect of EU enlargement in the 1990s, followed by the establishment of new EU eastern borders in 2004 and 2007, sparked the idea of “transforming barriers into bridges and fostering cooperation” (Cheskin and Kachuyevki 2019, 5). At first, Europe was “largely (...) content to sit back and rely on the ‘magnetism’ of its model” (Popescu and Wilson 2009, 3) and the “self-evident nature” of its normative power (Casier 2018, 19; Delcour and Wolczuk 2021) – a resource that became the cornerstone of European identity (Morozov 2018, 31). Faced with Russia’s growing assertiveness towards the “in-between”, the EU put in place more concrete mechanisms to promote its civilizational mission. For example, in 2015, the EU established the East StratCom Task Force, part of the European External Action Service, tasked with “developing communication products and campaigns focused on explaining EU policies and promoting European values in Eastern Neighbourhood (...). The EU also discusses broadcasting in local languages, primarily in the Russian language, toward these countries” (Huseynov 2016, 78-79). Another initiative, “engagement without recognition,” aims at counterbalancing Russia’s influence in de facto states through social and cultural cooperation and trust-building (Cooley and Mitchell 2010; Coppieters 2019; Caspersen 2019).

But Brussels is not the only “game in town” (Ademmer, Delcour, and Wolczuk 2016, 1). In the wake of the Color Revolutions, feeling a loss of influence in the “near abroad,” “soft power” (*myagkaya sila*) was first mentioned in 2007 and officially adopted in Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept in 2013, reaffirmed in 2016. It is defined as “a comprehensive toolkit for achieving foreign policy objectives building on civil society potential, information, cultural and other methods and technologies alternative to traditional diplomacy” (reported in Huseynov 2016, 79). In line with biopolitical caretaking of “our people” (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2020, 110), Saari (2014, 54) has found that soft power towards the post-Soviet neighborhood is defined in terms of humanitarian cooperation, which is distinct from the general term of public diplomacy.

Caring for “our people” abroad is not new in Moscow’s policies. While in Transnistria in 1992, then Vice-President Aleksandr Rutskoi declared that Russia needs to protect Russians wherever they live and using whatever means (Kaufman et Bowers 1998, 131). In 1993, at the UN General Assembly, Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev declared Russia’s “special responsibility” for protecting Russian language speakers (Pieper 2020, 762). The concept of *Russkiy mir* developed

over time. First debated in the 1990s, it officially took off in 2001 with President Putin's speech at the first Congress of Russian compatriots (Laruelle 2015, 6) and was then institutionalized with the creation of the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation in 2007 and of the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (called *Rossotrudnichestvo*) in 2008 (Cheskin and Kachuyevski 2019, 9; Saari 2014, 61). This "Russian World" is conceived as a "cultural radiation" and "'tentacles' of the Russian nation [that] should be well structured, organized and tightly attached to the body of the home country" (Suslov 2018, 338). Closely cooperating, the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation together with *Rossotrudnichestvo* promote the teaching of the Russian language and culture, provide grants for NGOs, youth movements and think-tanks, propose cultural and social programs for the "formation of favourable public opinion about Russia" and developing a "circle of friends" (Saari 2014, 60-61; *Russkiy Mir* Foundation website; Huseynov 2016). Reduced to a rivalry between "worlds" (Suslov 2018, 343), the *Russkiy Mir* is imagined as a civilizational community defined in cultural (conservative) terms (Russian language and culture, Orthodox Christianity), competing for people's hearts and souls with the alternative Western liberal model of modernity (Ohle, Cook, Jovanović and Han 2021; Suslov 2018, 330; Feklyunina 2015, 783). Russia's and the EU's targeted circle of friends overlap in the "in-between".

In this regional competition, Russia's "compatriots" are a resource that can be politically instrumentalized (Cheskin and Kachuyevski 2019, 8). Kallas remarks that "[t]he interchangeable usage of 'compatriot protection' and 'national interest protection' raise[s] questions about the role compatriots might play also in serving 'national interests'" (2016, 6). The protection of "compatriots" (who are not necessarily ethnic Russians) was rhetorically used as "a rescue mission" (Pieper 2020, 757) to justify the 2008 war in Georgia as well as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Cheskin and Kachuyevski 2019, 4). "Compatriots" are used for geopolitical and biopolitical boundary-(re)making.

Inside-out agency: navigating in-between

The biopolitical character of *Russkiy Mir* underlines how the condition of being “in-between” the EU and Russia is not limited solely to the belt of countries stretching from Belarus to Azerbaijan. The Baltic States, for instance, have been full members of the EU (and NATO) for nearly two decades, yet the presence of large Russian-speaking populations in Estonia and Latvia means that these countries have remained a key arena in which Russia’s policies intersect with those of the EU on minority and other issues. Moreover, as Maria Mälksoo (2013) has observed, the Baltic States have still to entirely shed the image of being “liminal” and potentially vulnerable border states following their integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions. This is all the more so following the 2014 events in Ukraine, which rekindled anxieties around a range of potential security threats emanating from neighboring Russia (Trimbach and O’Lear 2015; Grigas 2016; Bladaitė and Šešelgytė 2020).

By the same token, Russia itself is a (nominally) federal state with a population that is highly diverse in terms of ethnicity and with its own post-Soviet anxieties around societal cohesion and state integrity. As well as reaching out to diverse constituencies beyond Russia’s borders, the civilizational quality of *Russkiy Mir* is consciously purposed to reflect and accommodate the discourse of Russia as a multinational state, which, however symbolic in practice, is still regarded as important for regime stability (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2018). At the same time, Russia remains within the international minority rights frameworks established by the Council of Europe and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and these have constituted an important point of reference for at least some minority actors within the Federation.

As such, the geographical scope of the contributions to this Special Issue extends from Latvia (Jennie Schulze’s article on how Russia’s soft power influences policies towards local Russian-speakers) to Russia itself (David J Smith’s discussion of how non-Russian minority National Cultural Autonomy bodies and NGOs operate at the intersection of the competing minority rights and *Russkiy Mir* paradigms) via articles dealing with Moldova (Stefan Morar and Magdalena Dembińska on the country’s strategy of dual alignment with the opposing EU and Russian blocs), Gagauzia (Marcin Kosienkowski on strategic alignment with *Russkiy Mir* as a means of bolstering the region’s autonomy within Moldova at a time of geopolitical shift) and Abkhazia (Helge

Blakkisrud, Nino Kemoklidze, Tamta Gelashvili and Pål Kolstø on how this *de facto* state has negotiated its relationships with Russia, Georgia and the EU in the sphere of trade).

While the above-mentioned entities display significant differences as regards their scale, status, material capabilities and relationships to the two power blocs, the articles tell us that none should be regarded as entirely passive in the face of external influences (Dembńska, Mérand, and Shtaltovna 2020). Rather, the growing rivalry between the EU and Russia has provided all of them with opportunities to “renegotiate their geopolitical roles” (Berg and Vits 2020, 2) in a way that enhances their status and security and maximizes their room for maneuver within the international system. In this respect, Ademmer, Delcour and Wolczuk (2016) argue that the politics of the “contested neighbourhood” can be conceived of in terms of a triangular relationship within which the intervening entities have scope to *navigate* between competing regional projects. As they observe, “domestic constellations of actors, perceptions, and preferences” (Ademmer, Delcour and Wolczuk 2016, 4) thus become central to determining how these entities respond to external pressures. The contributions to this Special Issue enhance our understanding of this domestic dimension. In different ways, they show how elites at various scales work strategically to advance their interests through cultivating external ties as well as through reference to competing interpretations (ideational, cultural, material) of the international context that structures their actions (Miklossy and Smith 2019; Berg and Vits 2020).

In the opening article on Latvia, Jennie Schulze uses recent parliamentary debates over education and naturalization reforms to illustrate how policymakers in the country attempt to mediate Russia’s current strategies for projecting “soft power”. There is already a sizeable literature on how EU influence has intersected with domestic processes to shape minority policy outcomes in the country, though this has focused mainly on the pre-2004 accession period and (beyond this) the extent of subsequent “lock-in” or “backsliding” (Kelley 2004; Sasse 2008; Steen 2010). A largely separate body of work has also dealt with Moscow’s instrumentalization of Russian-speakers in the Baltic for geopolitical ends, which has persisted beyond EU enlargement and, as Schulze notes here, seems unlikely to end anytime soon (Grigas 2013; Kallas 2016; Cheskin and Kachuyevski 2019). Yet, while the pre-existing focus on outcomes makes it clear that external influences “matter” when it comes to policymaking, far less attention has been given to *how* they

matter. Schulze's article sheds important light on how processes of domestic mediation actually work, by showing how elites in Latvia *strategically frame* perceptions of external pressure in order to justify their policy preferences. Her approach builds on previous work (Brubaker 1996; Smith 2002; Schulze 2018) that conceptualizes the relationship between Russian-speakers, Latvia, Russia and European institutions in terms of a dynamic interaction between four political fields, whereby actors within each given field strategically construct "representations" of the others in order to justify their policy preferences. The great innovation of Schulze's work has been to conceptualize actual *policymaking* as a distinct contested field of action within this four-way relational nexus, wherein strategic framing of external discourse by individual actors can be investigated through process-tracing. While developed in relation to the particular context of the Baltic States, this is a methodology that could also be usefully applied to other cases in the region.

In the following article, Ștefan Morar and Magdalena Dembińska examine the case of Moldova. In the context of the outside-in two competing regionalisms, Chisinau is pursuing a "dual alignment" strategy. While it signed the Association Agreement and subsequently the DCFTA with the EU, Moldova is simultaneously a member of the CIS and has an observer status within the Eurasian Economic Union. For Constructivists, such dual orientation reflects dual loyalty, both to the East and to the West, at the society level. This in turn is a direct result of the historical identity-building in the region. For Realists, small and weak countries, such as Moldova, balance, bandwagon or combine the two by strategically "hedging", where ambiguity is a deliberate policy vis-à-vis competing powers, aimed at mitigating the risks of uncertainty. For Morar and Dembińska, these geopolitical macro perspectives tend to ignore domestic actors who navigate by adjusting and changing their strategies according to their own interests and benefits. Hence, to explain Moldova's dual alignment, the authors innovatively combine Putnam's two-level game theory (1988) with the "international broker" concept, developed by Dezaley and Garth (2002). This original framework enables them to link the domestic and international fields by focusing on strategies deployed by domestic actors embedded in different interface networks. First, mapping the domestic political field, they present elites with close ties (political, educational, business or kin) to Russia and/or to the West (Brussels, Bucharest, Washington). Second, they analyze these actors' formal and informal practices that account for a genuine "division of labor" among pro-Russian and pro-European actors, accounting for what the authors call the "collective international

broker.” A “thick” reconstructing of each actor’s story, position, interests and alliances, allows the authors to show how local actors strategically mobilize the international networks they are embedded in to sustain the dual alignment of Moldova, while using these Western and Eastern networks to bolster their own power domestically.

Building upon this analysis of the overall Moldovan context, Marcin Kosienkowski’s contribution explores the role of *Russkiy Mir* in legitimization strategies employed at a sub-state level, by ruling elites in Moldova’s Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia. Kosienkowski focuses on discourses deployed by Gagauzia’s Governor, Irina Vlah, through annual addresses, interviews, and other activities during her first term of office from 2015 to 2019. In 2014, following Chisinau’s signature of the EU Association Agreement, the People’s Assembly of Gagauzia responded to Moldova’s moves towards closer alignment with the EU by organizing a referendum on the options of further European integration or closer ties with Russia. More than 98% of local voters declared themselves in favour of joining the new Russia-led Customs Union. Given this context, elite identification with *Russkiy Mir* has been a crucial source of legitimacy for the local ruling elite, among a Gagauz population that (while Turkic by descent) is predominantly Russophone and Christian Orthodox by religion and which fears that closer ties to the EU might lead to renewed calls for Moldova’s unification with Romania. Alignment with *Russkiy Mir* also serves an important external function, since the elite hopes that by attaining legitimacy in the eyes of Moscow it will obtain material as well as other forms of support from the Russian authorities. For all this, Kosienkowski shows that a strategy of balancing between external actors was becoming increasingly apparent by the end of Vlah’s first term in office, as Russia’s financial assistance fell short of expectations and the EU increased its development aid to Gagauzia in light of the 2014 referendum. In this regard, Turkey also began to figure as an important international player at this time, increasing assistance to Gagauzia as part of its own strategy of engaging with Turkic-origin populations abroad. Overall, the article interestingly highlights broader questions about how identity and beliefs interact with material factors in determining how “in-between” elites navigate between competing regional forces (Terzyan 2017).

In a similar vein, the article by Helge Blakkisrud, Nino Kemoklidze, Tamta Gelashvili and Pål Kolstø Blakkisrud exploring Abkhazia’s economic interactions with its “patron” Russia, “parent”

Georgia and the EU shows that – in a context of contested statehood – “trade does not necessarily facilitate trust”. In material terms, Abkhazia remains almost wholly dependent upon Russia, which also provides it with security guarantees and is the only regional actor to have conferred the formal recognition of statehood that Abkhazia’s ruling elite seeks above all else. This very desire for sovereignty and a separate identity, however, also feeds misgivings about undue dependence upon Russia as a patron, especially given the legacy of problematic relations between the two parties during the 1990s and a collective memory relating to the historic experience of the Abkhaz under the Russian Empire. The priority of maintaining close relations with Moscow has thus been counterbalanced by an openness to pragmatic engagement with other external actors and talk of “multivectorism” in foreign policy. Possibilities to pursue this with Georgia are necessarily limited, given the unresolved question of Abkhazia’s status and even greater degree of distrust that separates the authorities in Sukhum/i and Tbilisi. Nevertheless, high volumes of unregulated, “informal” cross-border trade point to interesting patterns of “navigation” at the societal level, even if “status and lack of trust trump trade” when it comes to developing formal relations. Non-recognition (and fear of an adverse Russian reaction) also constitutes a potent barrier to developing closer economic relations with the EU, though there has been increased openness to “quiet diplomacy” overtures from that quarter following the DCFTA with Georgia, as well as trade through Russian and Georgian middlemen. Overall, while the agency enjoyed by Abkhaz actors is necessarily circumscribed, the article refutes any suggestion that the de facto states of the region are no more than “hapless pawns in the power-play of their patrons” (see also Berg and Vits 2020).

In the final contribution to the Issue, David J Smith begins from the “outside-in” perspective. Analysing minority issues within the contested neighbourhood using the same “quadratic nexus” framework used by Schulze in her article, he emphasizes the mediating role of particular domestic contexts and focuses especially on how minority actors navigate within the nexus to advance their own claims to autonomy. He also outlines Russia’s shift from initially working within the international minority rights “regime” during the early 1990s to actively challenging it during the 2000s through deployment of *Russkiy Mir* as a transnational, “civilizational” alternative to liberal norms. As Schulze and Kosienkowski also note in their contributions, nearly all existing literature has focused on how *Russkiy Mir* has been received beyond Russia’s borders. Far less attention has been paid to how non-Russian minorities within the Russian Federation itself have negotiated the

recent “civilizational turn”, in a context where the state has imposed further restrictions on civil society and increasingly sought to co-opt NCA bodies (already providing little more than symbolic cultural recognition for minorities) in support of its own domestic but also external policy agendas. Smith addresses this missing “inside-out” dimension through an analysis of interviews with minority elites across Russia. His findings suggest that while many acquiesce in the government’s top-down approach to “diversity management”, this sometimes owes more to pragmatic navigation within existing realities than it does to approval for the system in place. Some actors, meanwhile, reject the system in place and continue to aspire to the more meaningful forms of political participation prescribed by international minority rights frameworks. In any event, while the government has instrumentalized ethnic Russian nationalism as part of its repertoire of external action in the contested neighborhood, it cannot be seen to have an entirely free hand in this respect, given the need to maintain domestic stability.

Together, these contributions convincingly show that the states in-between are not mere recipients trapped between two competing geopolitical projects and biopolitical projections. An extant literature defined by notions of contestation and confrontation can easily create a picture of a region caught in a zero-sum game, where the “in-between” has to choose either Russia or Europe. The cases studied in this Special Issue, by contrast, argue for the autonomy and agency of the local. Domestic actors, be it at national or sub-national level, navigate while adjusting to the external pressures, negotiating and appropriating external discourses. In the process, constraints are often turned into opportunities for the local actors to exploit. In so far as the competing regional projects continue to allow space for such navigation, the contributions to this Special Issue strengthen a picture of an overlapping as well as contested neighbourhood. Furthermore, by delineating the particular interests and – in many cases - desire for complementary dual alignments held by local actors, they suggest that the region should be seen as more than just a “neighbourhood” for external powers. In most cases, the actors considered here have only a limited capacity to affect international high politics. Nevertheless, the “inside-out” perspective developed here opens up new ways to think about the spatial category of in-betweenness, challenging existing thinking premised on dividing the world according to clear lines of geopolitical demarcation.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the participants in the workshop “Diversity and sovereignty in the zone between the EU and Russia”, held at the Willy Brandt Center for German and European Studies, Wroclaw University (Poland), on November 29 – December 1, 2018, for their contribution and feedback on a first version of the articles included in this Special Issue. This workshop was part of a series of activities organized by the Jean Monnet BEAR Network (Between the EU and Russia: Domains of Diversity and Contestation) and would not have been possible without this Erasmus Plus support as well as the workshop’s local organizer, Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski.

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