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Vasif Huseynov

**GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRIES IN THE
'COMMON NEIGHBOURHOOD'**

*RUSSIA'S CONFLICT WITH THE WEST, SOFT POWER,
AND NEOCLASSICAL REALISM*

With a foreword by Nicholas Ross Smith

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Foreword

It is a great privilege to have the task of writing the foreword for what is a fantastic book by an extremely promising scholar, Vasif Huseynov. The lingering challenge of conducting any sort of useful research is to strike a balance between novelty and importance. The trouble in a saturated field like International Relations (and its sub-field of Foreign Policy Analysis) is that what can be described as novel is often not important and what is important is usually heavily examined (and thus, harder to provide novel insights). Therefore, Vasif deserves a lot of credit for producing a book that is both novel and important and, as such, makes a timely contribution to the fields of International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis.

Few would argue that the current cooling of relations between the West and Russia is not one of the great concerns of contemporary international politics. There is the crisis in Ukraine, but also the emergence of something close to a proxy war in Syria and the apparent infiltration of Western democracies by Russia. These have been concerning developments, of course, but they have also driven a significant amount of hyperbole in the analytical discourse about where the West-Russia relationship is heading. To Vasif's credit, he does not fall into this hyperbolic trap as he lets his rich empirical findings speak for itself.

Vasif forgoes buying the inherent sensationalism of the New Cold War narrative that has come to dominate recent analyses of the West-Russia relations—especially the idea that this current cooling of West-Russia relations resembles the global struggle that characterized the Cold War proper. Vasif limits his analysis to the common neighbourhood between Russia and the West in Eastern Europe. This is important because in the current international system, a uni-multipolar system if you will, it is regional settings where competition and conflict are increasing. Thus, one of the real contributions of Vasif's book is adding insight to the current state of geopolitics in Eastern Europe, and especially how the interactions of the West and Russia has created a tense and competitive regional security complex there.

In addition, Vasif's narrowing of scope to examine the use of soft power by the West and Russia in the common neighbourhood is important for three reasons. First, it is undeniable that the information war at the heart of the cooling of the West-Russia relationship is extremely important and, as it currently stands, the most competitive (what Vasif terms "expansive") aspect of the relationship. In an age of technological advances with regards communication, winning the narrative battle has surely become a central aspect of international political competition. One of the real insights offered by Vasif in this book is his analysis of Russia's soft power. Too often, scholars in the West underestimate Russia's intentional use of its soft power capabilities – often presenting it as a blunt hard power from a bygone era – which blinds their analyses. This, thankfully, is a trap Vasif does not fall into in this book, providing a useful expose of the Kremlin's soft power capabilities.

Second, Vasif makes an interesting contribution to the soft power literature with his observation that the levels of state autonomy in a target state is an important variable in how effective a soft power strategy can be. By taking one of the core arguments of neo-classical realism (gauging state-society relations of the state under examination), Vasif adds important nuance to the soft power debate, especially as a fixation remains in the literature on examining the only state utilizing soft power, not the target state. Indeed, the relative open contest between the West and Russia in Ukraine, compared to Belarus, is convincingly explained, in part, by this observation as Ukraine's less centralization made it far more vulnerable to soft power infiltration.

Third, Vasif reinvigorates the somewhat forgotten realist observation – forged by the likes of EH Carr and Hans Morgenthau – that winning the hearts and minds of people (both internally and externally) is an important aspect of foreign policymaking. Vasif does this credibly through synthesizing neo-classical realism with the literature on soft power. Given how important this ideational battle is in the current age, the lack of incorporation of soft power (or similar concepts) by many realists in their analyses is a major limitation of the paradigm. Thus, Vasif's examination of soft power

as an instrument of foreign policy within a neoclassical realist framework—adhering to the neoclassical realist mantra of “building theories”—has the potential to make a lasting contribution to realism’s continued usefulness as a paradigm of International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis.

Thanks to Vasif’s watertight research design, the empirical findings of this book are of great importance to not only understanding an often misunderstood (i.e. the utilization of soft power) aspect of the West-Russia relationship but also theorizing where the relationship might head in the future. Vasif’s conclusion that it is through instruments of soft power that the West and Russia are competing in their common neighbourhood—rather than through instruments of hard power—is convincing and significantly alters the way we should hypothesize about the Eastern Europe security complex moving forward. Ultimately, this book is a demonstration of how a theoretically informed, analytically focused study can produce insights and conclusions that have real-world application. And for that, Vasif should be applauded.

Nicholas Ross Smith