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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	10
The Puzzle.....	10
Literature Review and Research Gap.....	12
Theoretical Argument.....	17
Structure of the Thesis.....	18
Part 1. Analytical Framework.....	21
Chapter 1. Theoretical Framework.....	21
Introduction.....	21
1.1. Realism: Neoclassical Realism.....	22
1.2. Soft Power.....	37
Conclusion.....	63
Chapter 2. Methodology & Case Selection.....	66
Introduction.....	66
2.1. Case Selection.....	66
2.2. Methodology.....	78
Conclusion.....	81
Part 2. Soft Power in Russia – West Geopolitical Rivalries (2004 – 2016).....	82
Chapter 1. Soft Power in Western Foreign Policies.....	82
Introduction.....	82
1.1. Soft Power vs. Hard Power in the Policies of Western Powers.....	83
1.3. Soft Power as the Western Foreign Policy Tool.....	91

Conclusion.....	122
Chapter 2. Soft Power in Russia’s Practice.....	128
Introduction.....	124
2.1. Soft Power vs. Hard Power in Russia’s Policies.....	125
2.2. Soft Power as Russia’s Foreign Policy Tool.....	133
Conclusion.....	166
Part 3. The “Common Neighbourhood” States and Great Power Rivalries.....	169
Chapter 1. States with Relatively Strong State Autonomy: The Case of Belarus.....	169
Introduction.....	169
1.1. Belarus between the West and Russia.....	171
1.2. State Autonomy Vis-à-vis Non-State Actors.....	176
1.3. Non-State Actors Under the Influence of External Powers.....	178
1.4. Non-State Actors and External Alignment.....	186
Conclusion.....	190
Chapter 2. States with Relatively Weak State Autonomy: The Case of Ukraine.....	191
Introduction.....	191
2.1. Ukraine between the West and Russia.....	194
2.2. State Autonomy Vis-à-vis Non-State Actors.....	202
2.3. Non-State Actors Under the Influence of External Powers.....	209
2.4. Non-State Actors and External Alignment.....	225
Conclusion.....	230
Conclusions.....	233
The Puzzle and Theoretical Arguments.....	233
Empirical Findings.....	236
Implications for Theory.....	239
References.....	243

## **Summary:**

This thesis analyses soft power in the light of neoclassical realist premises as part of the foreign policy toolkit of great powers to expand their sphere of influence. It argues that if nuclear armed great powers compete against the same type of powers to expand or sustain their sphere of influence over a populated region, they use soft power as a major expansive instrument while military power remains a tool to defend themselves and back up their foreign policies.

Presenting its model of soft power, the thesis explores the role of soft power projection by great powers in the formation of the external alignment of regional states. It focuses on the Russia – West (i.e. the EU and the USA) rivalries over the states located between the EU and Russia (the region known as the “common (or shared) neighbourhood”) and on two of the regional states (Ukraine and Belarus) to test its hypotheses. It uses a long range of academic works, news media articles, official documents, public statements, reports of non-governmental organizations, etc. to pursue its analyses.

The thesis concludes that, due to several factors, primarily the possibly catastrophic consequences of military clashes, soft power is deployed as an expansive instrument amidst the territorial rivalries between nuclear-armed great powers while military power remains a tool for defence and backing up foreign policies. The thesis, however, highlights that the success of soft power projection by great powers depends also on the internal structure of the regional states.