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The Struggle for Power: Russia's Multifaceted Soft Power Strategy in Moldova

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Association Agreement
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EaP	Eastern Partnership
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EU	European Union
IR	International Relations
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer
MASSR	Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
MOB	The Metropolitan See of Bessarabia
MOC	The Metropolis of Chisinau and All Moldova
MSSR	Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Alliance
NGO	Nongovernmental Organisation
PD	Public Diplomacy
RM	*Russkiy Mir* (Russian World)
RMF	*Russkiy Mir* Foundation
ROC	Russian Orthodox Church
RomOC	Romanian Orthodox Church
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republic
WW2	Second World War

INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Moldova, in short Moldova, is a small country located between Romania and Ukraine. Moldova's population has been decreasing since the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and it currently has 2.6 million citizens (Statistica Moldovei, National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2022, 37). With an economy mainly consisting of an uncompetitive agricultural sector, scholars often refer to Moldova as 'the poorest country in Europe', and it struggles with high levels of corruption (Graney 2019, 248; Rumer 2017). Bordering Romania and Ukraine, Moldova is situated between Eastern and Western Europe. Moreover, Moldova is culturally, politically and economically positioned between East and West (Roper 2005, 502; 513). As argued by former Moldovan President Igor Dodon (Presedinte 2017e):

> 'Our people have a bivalent collective identity: Eastern and Western. From the point of view of religious affiliation, we are Orthodox – therefore Eastern, while from the point of view of linguistic and cultural identity, we are Latin – therefore Western. And any attempt to artificially reshape us, to cut away one of the two components of our collective essence and impose foreign models is counterproductive, even harmful. In other words, given our identity and geographical location, Moldova cannot afford to ally itself with Russia against Europe or with Europe against Russia. On the contrary, Moldova can and must contribute to the rapprochement between Russia and Europe'.

Despite Dodon's aim to prevent the reshaping of the Moldovan identity, Moldova has become subject to European Union (EU)- and Russia-led integration projects. These two sides have split Moldovan society: some Moldovans opt for the European path, while others prefer cooperation with Russia (Graney 2019, 249). Moldova committed to European integration by signing the EU Association Agreement (AA) in 2014 (Rumer 2017). When Dodon arrived as the new president in 2016, he promised to diminish EU cooperation and instead improve ties with Russia (Yagodin 2021, 139). After four years of pro-Russian presidency, the Moldovan public elected the pro-European Maia Sandu in 2020. Sandu shifted Moldova's focus towards EU integration. Still, Moldova remains dependent on Russia for its energy supply and economic markets. Moldova is thus struggling to balance East and West.

Since the disintegration of the USSR, Russia has attempted to extend its influence abroad. As stated by L'Amoreaux and Mabe (2019, 287-8), the Kremlin has three main goals: the persistence of President Vladimir Putin's rule, dominance in its neighbourhood and the prestigious status of a strong power. Ohle et al. (2021, 4) also refer to this phenomenon as 'imperial syndrome'. Seeking to restore its former status as an imperial power, Russia aims to regain its influence in the near abroad (post-Soviet space) and revive its great power status. Russia has demonstrated various strategies to achieve this. The most obvious is hard power. Russia uses military power, for example, in Ukraine (2022), Crimea (2014) and Georgia (2008), to extend its influence to these regions. Furthermore, many countries depend on

Russia's energy supply and economic market, and Russia uses this leverage to expand its impact (Krickovic and Pellicciari 2021, 93). Simultaneously, Russia uses soft power, described by Joseph Nye as the power of attraction, to draw post-Soviet citizens closer. While research on Russian soft power in some post-Soviet countries, like Ukraine, is abundant, others, like Moldova, have received little attention. Building on realist assumptions that Russia seeks to re-establish its great power status and is competing over influence in Moldova with the EU, this research discusses the questions: how has Russia used soft power to pull Moldova closer, and how has it affected Moldova's geopolitical stance vis-à-vis Russia? The research suggests that while Russia has significant soft power capabilities in Moldova due to shared historical, linguistic, cultural and religious features, it has failed to achieve its goals of pulling Moldova out of the EU's periphery into Russia's sphere of influence and re-establishing its great power status.

The process of this research started before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. While it is a fascinating time for research, not many studies on the effects of the war on Russia-Moldova relations exist at present. As a result, this research primarily focuses on Russian influence in Moldova from December 2016 until January 2022. This timeframe will uncover the pre-war Russia-Moldova relationship, providing a basis for further research on how the war impacted the relations.

The research first provides a comprehensive analysis of the existing literature. Building on this, the analytical framework and methodology outlining the research follow. Next, an analysis of the various elements of Russia's soft power strategy in Moldova follows, and the research concludes with a discussion of whether Russia has achieved its objectives.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Joseph S. Nye (2004) coined the concept of soft power as the power of attraction. Academic literature has recognised that Russia has adopted a soft power strategy to increase its influence in the post-Soviet space under Putin. This literature review discusses current debates regarding Russia's soft power use in the near abroad and identifies what is lacking in the literature, providing a basis for further research. While the current conflict in Ukraine has sparked much discussion concerning Russia's means of increasing influence abroad, this literature review and research focus on Russian influence in Moldova before the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

Before researching soft power, the concept must be carefully defined. Therefore, this literature review commences by analysing Nye's definition of soft power and critiques of other scholars. A thorough analysis of the concept and its critiques will indicate its strengths and weaknesses. The literature review continues to analyse how Russia employs soft power in the post-Soviet region and whether scholars would argue that Russian soft power has been successful. The literature review continues to focus on a less-studied country, examining scholarly work on Russia's soft power strategy in Moldova. This literature review presents an overview of how recent work has approached Russian soft power and indicates what is lacking in the existing literature.

1.1. Soft Power and Its Criticism

Joseph S. Nye, an American political scientist, defined soft power as 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion and payments' (Nye 2004, xi). Nye (2004) argues that although both seek to impact behaviour, soft- and hard power differ fundamentally; while soft power co-opts others, hard power coerces. Additionally, Nye (2004, 17) states that countries generate soft power through their culture, political ideals and policies and that both the state and civil society can generate soft power. While many scholars use Nye's concept of soft power, others adapt and criticise it.

Nye's concept of soft power has received much criticism from scholars. First, scholars criticise Nye's definition of soft power for having a liberal democratic bias. Keating and Kaczmarska (2019) and Kiseleva (2015) oppose Nye's assumption that countries yield soft power through liberal and democratic institutions. They perceive Nye's soft power as a hierarchical structure where American values are superior to others. Instead, they argue that countries with undemocratic regimes, like Russia, have soft power potential. Similarly, Lankina and Niemczyk (2015) and Grix and Kramareva (2017) disagree with Nye's notion that Russia fails to employ soft power due to its undemocratic political values and instead contend that Russia has soft power capabilities. Makarychev (2018) advances this argument and contends that Russia purposely highlights its conservative values to yield soft power and presents itself as a conservative alternative to the West. Admittedly, Kiseleva (2015) places Nye's concept of soft power and his universal values in the historical context; Nye first coined soft power in the unipolar post-Cold War world of the 1990s, which explains Nye's bias. In his response to these critiques, Nye (2021) agrees and emphasises that the context of the unipolar post-Cold War world led to the creation of a

prejudiced concept. Instead, Nye (2021, 201) argues that soft power is not exclusively a liberal or Western phenomenon but that 'attraction rests in the eye of the beholder'. In sum, the authors note a bias in Nye's initial concept of soft power, but both Nye and other scholars have since adopted the definition of soft power to suit other regime types.

Additionally, scholars contest Nye's perception that soft power is a natural phenomenon. Szostek (2014) argues that Nye contradicts himself by arguing that soft power is a natural phenomenon while arguing that states can produce or impose soft power. Likewise, Baldwin contends that Nye's perception of soft power 'tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology and institutions' (Nye 2004, 6). Rather, Baldwin argues that countries can increase their soft power potential through tangible resources. Nye (2021, 5-6) later accepted Baldwin's argument. In his response to the criticism, Nye acknowledges that some scholars have contended that the concept of soft power has lost meaning since there is no clear distinction between hard and soft power. However, according to Nye, this distinction is not relevant. Instead, Nye perceives power as a spectrum where hard power and soft power lie on opposite ends. A state's actions can be placed on the spectrum and contain both hard and soft power elements (Nye 2021, 6). A sharp hard/soft power distinction thus does not exist. As a result, states like Russia can also project soft power, despite how Russia frames its soft power narratives or whether it imposes its soft power onto others.

Next, scholars, such as Szostek (2014), argue that Nye's concept of soft power should focus more on the perception of soft power. Likewise, Cheskin (2017, 278) criticises Nye for ignoring 'the fourth face of power' and contends that soft power 'is attuned to the agency of the subject'. As a result, Cheskin focuses on the perception of Russian soft power. Other scholars, like Bogomolov and Lytvynenko (2012), Hudson (2015) and Kallas (2016), also focus on the perceptive side, which suits their research purposes of uncovering the population's response to Russian soft power.

Despite the criticism towards Nye's definition, many scholars have adopted Nye's original definition of soft power when examining the case of Russia. Nielsen and Paabo (2015), Rutland and Kazantsev (2016), Wolfe (2016), Mkhoyan (2017), Kramareva and Grix (2018), and Česnakas and Isoda (2019) are all examples of scholars who adopt Nye's definition of soft power to the Russian case. Most scholars thoroughly discuss the concept of soft power and the relevant debates on the contested concept yet decide to employ Nye's original definition in their research. It thus seems that despite the critical view of scholars, Nye's definition of soft power suffices their research or approach. For example, Solik and Baar (2019) and Hudson (2018) acknowledge other scholars' critiques of Nye's definition of soft power but, like Kiseleva (2015), state that the context of the time explains Nye's views. They adopt Nye's original concept to another actor that, over time, has built up soft power potential, namely Russia. Nye's conceptualisation of soft power thus remains relevant and is still broadly used in the academic literature on Russian soft power.

Other Notions of Soft Power

Contrasting the literature, Rotaru (2018) does not use Nye's definition of soft power and instead uses Putin's conceptualisation of soft power. Putin perceives soft power as a country using its influence to improve foreign policy. Using Putin's definition of soft power seems to support Rotaru's research on Russia's soft power approach in the near abroad since it portrays how Russian elites perceive and thus employ soft power. Additionally, in research on Russia's involvement in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Hudson (2018, 1358) redefines soft power as 'a polity's ability to successfully communicate its worldview in a way that co-opts a target audience into the projected cultural narrative and thereby supports the realisation of foreign policy goals'. Hudson's definition seems similar to Nye's understanding but could apply to any regime type. The works by Hudson and Rotaru indicate that research on soft power can build on various definitions so long it aligns with the research purposes.

Next, some scholars combine soft power with other International Relations (IR) concepts. Feklyunina (2016) and Huseynov (2016) focus on specific aspects of soft power. Feklyunina (2016) connects Nye's power of attraction to collective identity, while Huseynov (2016) focuses on propaganda as a specific aspect of soft power. Other scholars relate soft power to public diplomacy (PD). Simons (2015, 2) argues that soft power is closely related to PD, stating that PD is directed towards the population of another country to improve one's position. Likewise, Yagodin (2021) assesses digital diplomacy concerning language as a soft power means. Saari (2014) and Just (2016) also relate soft power to PD. Hudson (2022), on the other hand, connects soft power to Gramsci's concept of hegemony and highlights the audience's perception of Russia's soft power efforts. Makarychev (2018) takes a different approach and relates soft power to biopolitics. Makarychev states that biopolitics focuses on naturalising identities, which unifies people and boosts attraction. Makarychev argues that Russia uses biopolitics to improve its national identity and to distinguish itself from the West. Depending on the research type and goals, the concept of soft power can thus also be related to other concepts in IR.

Additionally, authoritarian diffusion is closely connected to Russian soft power. Ambrosio (2010) contends that authoritarian regimes like Russia can deter other countries from democratic processes. According to Ambrosio (2010, 376),

> 'rather than aggressively spreading a particular form of government (for example, fascism or communism), countries such as Russia and China are more interested in creating global conditions under which democracy promotion is blunted, and state sovereignty (understood as the ability of leaders to determine the form of government for their country) is further entrenched'.

This statement relates to Nye's hard/soft power distinction since countries prevent aggressive 'hard' methods and instead seek to diminish Western or democratic influence through softer means. Additionally, Ambrosio (2009, 120) mentions that 'countries are more likely to be subjected to a norm

cascade from countries are like them in terms of their regional identity'. Moreover, in later work, Ambrosio (2010, 385) mentions linkage as a compelling aspect of authoritarian diffusion and argues that stronger cultural bonds between countries strengthen the chances of authoritarian diffusion. Ambrosio's statement closely relates to Feklyunina's (2016) argument regarding the connection between soft power and collective identity. Overall, drawing from Ambrosio's work, like soft power, authoritarian diffusion is associated with the power of attraction. Roberts (2015, 155) also notes the importance of linkage in authoritarian diffusion and concludes that 'Russia continues to develop and strengthen linkage with all former Soviet states in its "near abroad", through cultural, economic and military channels, but also through political channels, such as the party of power'. Ziegler (2016) notes that the process of authoritarian diffusion is present in Central Asian countries to a limited extent, contending that while Central Asian countries are hostile towards accepting Western values, they are also not keen on reliving the Soviet experience of adopting Russia's values. Ziegler's argument exemplifies the interface between authoritarian diffusion and soft power; both focus on using values to draw others closer. Moreover, while noting the importance of cultural connections to generate linkage, Roberts and Ziemer (2018, 155) view economic and security connections as the main component of linkage. The works by Ziegler (2016) and Roberts and Ziemer (2018) highlight the distinction between soft power and authoritarian diffusion, as soft power theorists usually classify economic and security assets as hard power means. Still, the findings by scholars researching Russian authoritarian diffusion could provide valuable insights into Russia's soft power strategy since both recognise Russia's aim of attracting others.

1.2. Russian Soft Power

Russia's Objectives

The literature on Russian soft power in the post-Soviet space recognises two intertwined rationales behind the use of Russian soft power; the regaining of the great power status that it previously lost and the challenging of Western influence in the near abroad.

Just (2016, 84) argues that Russia dealt with an image issue throughout the 1990s. Russia had lost its great power status that it enjoyed during the Cold War and searched for a new way to establish itself internationally. As Just (2016, 84) argues, '[t]he concept of soft power has been of increasing importance to Russia, as a recognition of "great power" status has re-emerged as one of Russia's international priorities, and such a goal becomes challenging, if not unattainable, without a general positive international acceptance of Russia'. Other scholars also note Russia's drive to regain its great power status. According to Rutland and Kazantsev (2016, 397), Russia seeks to regain its power status and recognises soft power as an essential asset. Likewise, Grix and Kramareva (2017, 464; 466-7) argue that Russia used soft power during the 2014 Winter Olympics to improve its global status and re-establish itself as a great power. Keating and Kaczmarska (2019, 5) analyse soft power in light of Russia's attempts to restore its great power status, but at the same time, they acknowledge that as

tensions between Russia and the West increased, Russia's interest in soft power grew, indicating that Russia's objectives encompass more than a status-issue.

While acknowledging Russia's aim of restoring its power status, Sergunin and Karabeshkin (2015, 359) and Kiseleva (2015, 320-1) emphasise that Russia is competing over influence in the post-Soviet space with the West. They contend that Russia uses its soft power to counterbalance Western efforts and seeks to limit Western influence by drawing countries closer. Huseynov (2016, 72) shares similar beliefs and argues that Russia 'invest[s] massively in projects to win over the hearts and minds of people and to influence the public opinion in the former Soviet countries' to counterbalance Western influence. Similarly, Nizhnikau (2016, 208) contends that Russia aims to prevent post-Soviet countries from further drifting West towards EU integration. Literature on authoritarian diffusion also contends that Russia seeks to prevent Western influence in the near abroad and instead promotes itself. For example, Ambrosio (2010, 376-7) states that Russia presents itself as an alternative to the West, aiming to prevent democratisation processes and the further involvement of the West in the near abroad. Likewise, more recent work by Roberts and Ziemer (2018, 156) contends that 'Russia is seen to have a vested interest in preventing the further spread of democratising influences in order to shield its own domestic politics'. According to Roberts and Ziemer (2018), Russia wants to prevent the diffusion of Western ideals to its domestic audience and, as a result, aims to counterbalance attempts to spread Western influences in the near abroad.

According to some, the beginning of Russia's aims to confront Western influence can be traced back to the 2004-5 Orange Revolution. Feklyunina (2016, 781) argues that Russia's interest in soft power gained momentum after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. The Revolution indicated that Ukraine was shifting westwards, sparking Russian efforts to reverse this trend. Likewise, Hudson (2015, 331) contends that Ukraine's shift towards the West during the Orange Revolution triggered Russia's interest in improving its image in the near abroad, seeking to retain the countries in its sphere of influence. Lankina and Niemczyk (2015, 104) also regard the Orange Revolution as a significant shift in Russian soft power policy. They indicate that the revolution provoked Russian interest in limiting the influence of the West in the near abroad. Moreover, returning to the status issue, Saari (2014, 50) argues that '[i]n Russia, the revolutions were seen as humiliating signs of Russia's weakening influence in the post-Soviet neighbourhood'. Similarly, focusing on Ukraine, Bogomolov and Lytvynenko (2012, 2; 4) argue that, according to Russia, Ukraine is part of the Russian identity, and as a result, a Ukrainian move towards Europe away from Russia would threaten Russia's internal and global status. Since the Orange Revolution, soft power has thus become a vital aspect of Russia's broader goal of retaining its influence in the post-Soviet space while limiting Western influence.

Aspects of Russian Soft Power

The literature discusses various soft power instruments that Russia employs in the post-Soviet space. Much of the literature focuses on soft power methods regarding identity. Makarychev (2018, 142)

analyses Russia's emphasis on its conservative identity, including the *Russkiy Mir* (RM), the Russian World, and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), and contends that Russia employs this to challenge the post-Cold War world order to increase Russia's status compared to the West. Likewise, Simons (2015), Feklyunina (2016) and Česnakas and Isoda (2019) focus on identity formation as a Russian soft power means. Moreover, building on identity formation, many scholars focus on aspects connected to the RM as a soft power means. Due to its loose definition that could include anyone connected to Russia, the RM is a broad concept encompassing various aspects. As a result, scholars examining the RM as a soft power means often focus on specific aspects of the RM identity. Some scholars, such as Bogomolov and Lytvynenko (2012), Hudson (2018), Kazharski and Makarychev (2015), Solik and Baar (2019) and Payne (2015) research the religious soft power and analyse how the ROC has attempted to draw people in the post-Soviet space closer to Russia. The literature agrees that the ROC is one of the most influential Russian soft power strategies in the post-Soviet space. Religion is, therefore, an important aspect to analyse when researching Russian soft power. Next, other research examines how Russia uses language as a soft power instrument. For example, Mkhoyan (2017) and Simons (2015) contend that Russia uses the Russian language and education to unite people under a common identity to draw them closer. Additionally, next to language, Vorotnikov and Ivanova (2019) and Bogomolov and Lytvynenko (2012) argue that Russia unites those with an affinity to Russian culture and history under a common identity. Likewise, Kallas (2016) focuses on how Russia uses historical relationships and the appreciation of Russian culture to increase its soft power. In sum, authors have noted that the Russian soft power strategy seeks to create a common identity based on religious, linguistic, historical and cultural connections.

Some scholars identify aspects of Russian soft power unrelated to a shared identity. Kazharski and Makarychev (2015) and Lutsevych (2016), for example, highlight the use of Nongovernmental Organisations (NGOs) as a soft power resource. Moreover, Bogomolov and Lytvynenko (2012), Simons (2015) and Vorotnikov and Ivanova (2019) highlight the importance of media regarding the improvement of the country's image. Still, one could consider these aspects to fall under one of the before mentioned categories; media is closely connected to language use and culture, and NGOs often relate to culture.

The literature indicates that common identity is an essential aspect of Russian soft power in the post-Soviet space. As exemplified in the works mentioned above, as well as Rotaru's work (2018), historical, cultural, linguistic and religious aspects are the main components of this shared identity. Thus, research on how Russia has implemented its soft power strategy should concisely examine these four aspects of a shared identity.

1.3. Has Russian Soft Power Been Effective?

The literature contains debates about the effectiveness of Russian soft power and how Russian soft power has affected Russia's relationships with other post-Soviet countries. While Yagodin (2021) only

focuses on the implementation of soft power and refrains from focusing on political intent, many scholars aim to find a way to measure the success of Russian soft power. Scholars utilise various strategies to analyse how soft power has impacted relations with Russia and thus reach different conclusions about the effectiveness of Russian soft power.

Few scholars argue that Russian soft power has been successful. Still, Keating and Kaczmarska (2019) believe that Russia can exercise soft power despite its authoritarian and undemocratic regime and argue that Russia has gained support for policies, indicating a slight success of Russia's soft power. Grix and Kramareva (2017) also argue that Russian soft power has been effective but focus on the domestic audience. They state that Russia's soft power strategy during the 2014 Winter Olympics was successful since many Russians believed that hosting the Games improved Russia's status. Grix and Kramareva conclude that Putin's popularity increased after the 2014 Olympics, yet it is unclear whether the Olympics or the annexation of Crimea caused this. Keating and Kaczmarska, as well as Grix and Kramareva, thus argue that Russia has gained support for domestic and international policies and, therefore, argue that Russian soft power has been adequate.

Other scholars argue that Russian soft power has mixed results. Dimitrova et al. (2017) evaluate soft power by analysing the tone in media coverage and conclude that although Russia's soft power capabilities in the post-Soviet space are improving, Russia's image has not improved. Kallas (2016) analyses the effectiveness of soft power by focusing on historical relationships and examines the extent to which compatriots identify themselves with Russia. Kallas concludes that while Russia-Estonia relations are complex, some Estonians have started culturally associating with Russia, which indicates that Russia's soft power in Estonia is improving. Furthermore, Wolfe (2016) examines soft power by analysing whether the domestic audience has accepted the Kremlin's narratives and contends that while Russia's global soft power has failed, the Russian population accepted the authorities' attempt to reshape national identity. Moreover, Ziegler (2016, 563) concludes that while Russia's authoritarian diffusion in Central Asia successfully pulled countries away from adopting Western values, they are also not likely to adopt Russia's values. Likewise, Roberts and Ziemer (2018, 167) conclude that while evidence of authoritarian diffusion in Armenia exists, there is 'limited evidence of policy convergence in key areas'. Russia's strategies to gain influence in the post-Soviet states thus have both strengths and weaknesses.

Still, most scholars argue that Russian soft power is not effective. Much of the literature evaluates the success of Russian soft power in connection to the use of hard power, concluding that Russian soft power is ineffective. Hudson (2015), Rotaru (2018) and Saari (2014) argue that Russia forces its soft power upon the audience, making the recipient suspicious of Russia's objective. Similarly, Tafuro (2014) and Sergunin and Karabeshkin (2015) argue that although Russia has soft power resources, it is ineffective because Russia also exercises hard power, limiting Russia's attractive pull. Other scholars evaluate Russian soft power by examining how it has impacted Russia's relations with other states. Bogomolov and Lytvynenko (2012) and Just (2016) argue that Russian soft power is

unsuccessful because Russia has failed to establish partnerships with other countries. Additionally, Feklyunina (2016) contends that Russia's employment of the RM identity had limited impact because the pushed identity was incompatible with existing identities in Ukraine, particularly the pro-European identity. Likewise, Kazharski and Makarychev (2015), Nielsen and Paabo (2015) and Simons (2015) argue that Russian soft power has been ineffective because it has failed to improve relations with other post-Soviet countries, and they all argue that Russia has failed to compete with soft power from Western institutions like the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Next, Mkhoyan (2017) evaluates the success of individual Russian soft power means and concludes that Russian soft power has been ineffective because of the lack of interest in Russian culture and language. Likewise, Laurelle (2015), Česnakas and Isoda (2019) and Kallas (2016, 17) argue that Russian soft power has limited influence due to demographic changes and a shift in identity. Due to demographic change, a smaller portion of the population feels nostalgic for Soviet times, and the knowledge of the Russian language is decreasing. The number of compatriots is thus decreasing, limiting Russia's capabilities to spread soft power narratives like the RM. Likewise, Simons (2015) asserts that Russian soft power based on a common identity in the Baltic States is limited due to complex historical relations, Russia being perceived as aggressive and arrogant, and the lower living standards in Russia.

While some scholars argue that Russian soft power has succeeded, most of the literature points out its flaws, arguing that Russia's image has not improved and that Russia has failed to pull countries closer. Scholars evaluate the effectiveness of Russia's soft power primarily by analysing how relationships between the countries have developed, whether Russia has gained support for its policies and whether the recipient country's behaviour matches Russia's intent.

1.4. Russian Soft Power in Moldova

Most research on Russian soft power focuses on Russia's employment of soft power in a specific country or region. Some scholars, such as Maliukevičius (2013), Saari (2014), Tafuro (2014), Laurelle (2015), Sergunin and Karabeshkin (2015), Huseynov (2016), Lutsevych (2016) and Rotaru (2018) focus on the general post-Soviet space or various post-Soviet countries to analyse Russia's overarching soft power strategy. On the other hand, others focus their research on a specific country or region within the post-Soviet space. While some countries or regions have received much attention in the existing literature, research on other countries is limited. Much of the literature focuses on Russian soft power in Ukraine (for example, Feklyunina 2016) and the Baltic States (for example, Kallas 2016).

Other countries receive little attention. Research on Russian soft power in Moldova is limited and often focuses on specific aspects of Russia's soft power strategy rather than combining the different aspects to provide insights into Russia's broader soft power strategy in Moldova. Ohle et al. (2021), Solik and Baar (2019) and Payne (2015) all analyse the ROC as a means of soft power in Moldova. The three agree that the ROC has significant soft power potential in Moldova due to religious ties between the ROC and the Orthodox Church in Moldova. Nevertheless, they do not relate this to other aspects of

Russia's soft power strategy in Moldova. Next to Russia's religious influence, some research on soft power in Moldova compares Russia's soft power approach towards Moldova to the EU's. While building their analysis on different aspects of soft power strategies, Wetzinger (2022), Yagodin (2021), and Nizhnikau (2016) agree that Russia and the EU compete over soft power influence in Moldova. The comparative work provides valuable insights into the Russia-EU competition over Moldova, yet a thorough analysis explicitly focusing on Russian soft power and its effects in Moldova remains lacking. Similarly, some scholars mention Moldova briefly in their work yet do not widen their scope and analyse Russian soft power in Moldova in detail. For example, Rotaru (2018) mentions Russian media in Moldova, as well as the ROC and NGOs, yet due to the focus on other countries, the research misses a thorough analysis. Likewise, while Matveeva (2018) dedicates a section of the research to soft power in Moldova and discusses the Russian language and culture, the analysis does not dive deep into Russia's soft power strategy. While the existing literature is a valuable stepping stone for understanding Russian soft power in Moldova, extensive research on the Russian implementation of soft power in Moldova is lacking.

1.5. Conclusion

Russian soft power in the post-Soviet space remains a relevant and contested topic within academic literature. Disputes around the definition of soft power have led to extensive explorations of critiques on the concept in the literature. Therefore, research on soft power must acknowledge these critiques and carefully explain its understanding of soft power. Only then can comprehensive conclusions be drawn.

The literature identifies two main policy objectives of Russia; re-establishing its great power status and increasing its influence in the post-Soviet space to counterbalance Western influence. Moreover, the literature identifies a broad range of Russian soft power instruments. Most research identifies the creation of a common identity as Russia's primary soft power strategy. The literature has indicated that research on identity focuses on historical, linguistic, cultural and religious connections. As a result, research that seeks to analyse how Russia implements soft power in the near abroad should carefully examine how Russia employs these aspects to pull other countries closer. Moreover, while some scholars argue that Russian soft power has been successful, the majority of the literature notes flaws in Russia's soft power strategy. Scholars measure the effectiveness of soft power by analysing how relationships between Russia and other nations developed and whether the recipient country's behaviour complements Russia's goal. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the broader Russian soft power objectives is vital for research on the effectiveness of Russian soft power.

Moreover, while some countries like Ukraine and the Baltic states have received much attention, others, such as Moldova, have received little attention in the literature on Russian soft power. While some literature on Russian soft power in Moldova exists, it is limited. Nevertheless, Moldova could be an interesting case to examine Russian soft power, as it has close connections to Russia and fertile

grounds for using a common identity as a soft power strategy. As a result, this research will examine how Russia has employed its soft power strategy and how it has impacted Russia-Moldova relations.

2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Soft Power

All in all, the concept of soft power, as once coined by Nye, is a much-debated topic, and research on the topic needs a concise definition that suits the purpose of the research. This research examines how Russia seeks to pull Moldova closer through soft power. Nye's (2004, xi) definition of soft power as 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion and payments' is valuable for identifying what could be considered a soft power method. Still, critiques by Keating and Kaczmarska (2019) and Lankina and Niemczyk (2015) on Nye's biases towards undemocratic and illiberal regimes must be considered. Following their arguments and the fact that many scholars have analysed soft power exercised by Russia, this research stems from the argument that any country could exercise soft power, despite its regime type. Unlike Nye's initial claims, this research thus builds on the belief that Russia has soft power potential.

Additionally, this research focuses on how Russia seeks to increase its influence in Moldova through soft rather than hard power means. Nye's distinction that soft power co-opts and hard power coerces seems helpful for this research because it can help distinguish soft from hard power means. However, as Nye (2021) later recognised, the hard/soft power distinction is unclear in some instances. Would soft power strategies be considered soft if forced or consist of lies? To overcome this, Nye (2021) framed the hard/soft power distinction as a spectrum in his later adaption of the concept. Nye bases the spectrum on voluntarism; hard power is imposed while targets willingly accept soft power. Nye illustrates that 'hard power is like brandishing carrots or sticks; soft power is more like a magnet' (2021, 201). The spectrum of hard and soft power thus depends on the extent to which targets accept (and are not forced to accept) power strategies. This spectrum is useful for this research: the Kremlin actively seeks to increase Russian influence through its imposed soft power strategy, and Russian soft power is not merely a magnet of attraction, but instead, it is an instrumented method by the Kremlin. While Russia frames it as a soft power strategy, the Kremlin's soft power strategy seems to lie between the soft and hard power sides. Even though this type of soft power is not like a magnet, it provides valuable insights into how Russia seeks to influence Moldova through softer means.

The literature review emphasises that Russia's main objective regarding its soft power strategy is twofold. First, Russia seeks to re-establish its great power status. Russia's historical experience is marked by its status as a great and multi-ethnic state. However, with the fall of the USSR, Russia lost its great power status. The literature indicates that Russia aims to re-establish its status globally and uses soft power to achieve this. Second, Russia aims to limit Western influence in the near abroad. Russia perceives Western integration projects in the post-Soviet space as a security and image threat. As a result, it seeks to maintain its influence in the post-Soviet space through soft power. This thesis builds on the objectives identified in the literature and analyses whether Russia's soft power in Moldova has helped achieve them.

Lastly, the literature identifies that Russia exercises soft power in various ways. This thesis will centre around a specific focus on the creation of a common identity through historical, linguistic, cultural and religious means. Moldova and Russia share historical, linguistic, cultural and religious connections, which can provide fertile grounds for Russian soft power policies centred around a shared identity. However, the literature review has also emphasised that research on these aspects related to soft power in Moldova is limited. The existing literature has indicated that analysing historical, linguistic, cultural and religious aspects of Russian soft power provides a comprehensive overview of how Russia exercises soft power in Moldova. This provides a sound basis to examine how Russia-Moldova relations developed and whether Russia has achieved its overarching objectives.

2.2 Framework

Most research on Russian soft power builds on a constructivist approach. According to constructivists, 'there is no objective social or political reality independent of our understanding of it' (Heywood 2011, 71). Instead, constructivism believes that the world is more fluid and builds on the assumption that the world is historically and socially constructed by individuals or groups (Heywood 2011, 71-2). As Walt (1998, 40) emphasises, constructivists regard identities and relationships between states as constructed historical and social processes rather than given realities (Walt, 1998, 40). Moreover, constructivists tend to focus on immaterial social aspects (Jackson and Sørenson, 2007, 209). Constructivists concern themselves with issues surrounding ideas, values and beliefs rather than economic or military power. While material aspects play a vital role in international politics, constructivists, like Wendt (1995, 71), argue that the socially constructed meaning and relationships make these aspects matter. As argued by Gallarotti (2011, 26), '[i]t is no coincidence that such sources of power [soft power] have been embraced by neoliberalism and constructivism, paradigms that have underscored the changing nature of world politics'. Considering the constructivist focus on immaterial aspects and the constructed and ever-changing reality, it is thus logical that much research on soft power builds on a constructivist approach. For example, Kiseleva (2015) and Feklyunina (2016) employ a constructivist approach to Russian soft power. Kiseleva (2015, 316) views soft power as a 'hegemonic discourse that produces power and relations of power of its own'. States seeking to implement soft power must regard the hegemonic top (the US and the West) and its criteria. Instead of a rivalry with the West, Kiseleva thus frames soft power as relational dynamics on which Russia bases its soft power strategy. Similarly, Feklyunina (2016) uses a social-constructivist approach to soft power and relates it to collective identity. Feklyunina (2016, 777) contends that 'actors' interests are not pre-given or fixed, but shaped by their socially constructed identities'. According to Feklyunina (2016, 777), soft power is about attracting others when the two sides 'see themselves as part of the same socially constructed reality'.

Realists, on the other hand, perceive the world differently. Realists contend that global politics is about 'constant power struggles and conflict' (Heywood 2011, 14). Realists assume that people and states are intrinsically selfish and act out of personal interest. Additionally, they perceive states as the

prime actors in global politics. According to realists, states seek to increase their power vis-à-vis others and seek security without dependence on others. Moreover, realists perceive the world order as anarchic, and a balance of power ensures stability (Heywood 2011, 14-5). John Mearsheimer, a prominent realist in IR, adopts these aspects in his book on offensive realism, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. According to Mearsheimer (2011,17-8), there are three core aspects to international politics: (1) states are the main actors, (2) states' behaviour depends on external rather than internal factors, and (3) states compete for power in a zero-sum environment. According to Mearsheimer (2001, 2),

> '[t]he overriding goal of each state is to maximise its share of world power, which means gaining power at the expense of other states. But great powers do not merely strive to be the strongest of all the great powers, although that is a welcome outcome. Their ultimate aim is to be the hegemon - that is, the only great power in the system'.

Mearsheimer contends that states' ultimate goal is to become the hegemon, but because this is (almost) impossible, states seek to shift the balance of power in their favour, either diminishing the power of their rival or increasing their own, achieving relative gains in the anarchic world order. Mearsheimer emphasises offensive realism as an antonym of Waltz's defensive realism. Mearsheimer (2001, 19) contends that Waltz's defensive realism shifts the attention of the state's inherent aggression to the objective of survival and security. Still, similar to the general notion of realism, Waltz contends that due to the anarchic nature of the world, states still consider the balance of power and compete with other states over power since power provides security and survival; 'anarchy encourages states to behave defensively and to maintain rather than upset the balance of power' (Mearsheimer 2001, 19-20). On the other hand, offensive realism contends that 'the international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of rivals, and to take advantage of those situations when the benefits outweigh the costs' (Mearsheimer 2001, 21). Despite the type of realism (defensive or offensive), it places states in an anarchic world and focuses on the competition for power. As Gallarotti (2011, 26-7) notes, realists are typically concerned with how states use 'material resources' to increase their influence. Soft power, thus, is not a usual research field for realists. Gallarotti (2011, 27) contends that due to the anarchic nature of the world and the lack of an overarching power, 'actors […] optimize tangible power resources (i.e., hard power) only because such resources are more certain to provide protection'. Realists argue that due to the lack of guarantees, states are less likely to employ intangible means like soft power. Still, realism could also provide a valuable framework for research on Russian soft power.

As discussed in the literature review and the section above, Russia's main foreign policy goal is to re-establish its great power status and to counter Western efforts to draw states closer by increasing its influence in the near abroad. Russia's objectives are closely related to the realist paradigm. Referring back to Mearsheimer's (2001) three points, the issue of Russian soft power concerns states since

Russia's soft power policy is state-driven rather than a natural magnet of attraction. Moreover, Russia's actions seem to depend on external factors; namely, countries in Russia's periphery further drifting towards the West and Russia's status declining. Lastly, the EU and Russia compete over influence in the post-Soviet space, and it seems as if Russia perceives this competition as a zero-sum game where states either choose to side with the West or with Russia. Moreover, as discussed in the literature review, soft and hard power lie on a spectrum, and a clear hard/soft power distinction is difficult to define, particularly regarding an authoritarian state like Russia that 'pushes' its soft power rather than naturally pulling others closer. Due to the unclear hard/soft power divide, adopting a realist approach to soft power is possible since the soft power strategy is part of Russia's larger, more realist aspirations. Overall, while soft power is typically a constructivist phenomenon, the realist aspirations of Russia's foreign policy and the competitive environment regarding influence in the post-Soviet space allow for a realist paradigm.

Although limited, some literature builds on the realist paradigm to address Russian soft power in the post-Soviet space. Patalakh (2016), like this research, contends that Russia competes over influence in Moldova, and it seeks to maximise its relative gains compared to the West. Similarly, drawing on realist John Mearsheimer, Götz (2016) uses a neorealist theory to uncover why countries construct spheres of influence and contends that states base the use of hard and soft power tools on the level of external pressure, highlighting realists' focus on external factors. Huseynov (2019) also uses realist assumptions to uncover Russia's hard and soft power use. Huseynov (2019, 230) refers back to Waltz's focus on the defensive nature of states, yet perceives 'hard power as a defensive instrument and soft power as an expansive instrument' and concludes that the non-military means have proven effective in increasing influence. Drawing from the analysis above, a realist approach suits this research since it stems from the fact that Russia's primary objectives include the prevention of Western influence in the near abroad and re-establishing its power status. Moreover, this research seeks to uncover whether Russia's soft power strategy successfully increases Russia's influence in Moldova and, therefore, seems similar to Huseynov's focus on soft power as an expansive instrument. While constructivist research has significantly added to the literature and provides valuable insights into constructed contexts and relationships between states, a realist approach seems suitable for this research on Russian soft power in Moldova.

2.3 Methodology

Due to the limited literature on realist approaches to Russian soft power, there are few examples of methodological strategies. Moreover, since this research follows a realist approach and focuses on states' rather than individual behaviour, it is impractical to utilise methods often used in constructivist work, such as interviews or surveys. These methods provide insights into individuals or societal groups rather than states. Still, realists Götz (2016), Patalakh (2016), and Huseynov (2019) provide reasonable

grounds for research on Russian soft power, all using in-depth analyses for their studies on Russian soft power.

This thesis also draws on an in-depth analysis to uncover Russia-Moldova relations. It builds on a critical analysis of academic work, reports by research institutes and NGOs, official government publications and statements to uncover Russia-Moldova relations. The in-depth analysis will comprise a historical analysis of Russia-Moldova relations and an analysis of the current relationship. The historical analysis will provide valuable insights into how Russia-Moldova relations have developed and serve as a basis for analysing how Russia has employed soft power in Moldova. The analysis will indicate how the states have interacted and how Russian soft power has impacted Moldova's perception of Russia.

Additionally, insights into how the Moldovan leadership has responded to Russia's soft power efforts could prove useful for this research. Along with other politicians, the Moldovan leadership formulates Moldova's policies and steers the country in a specific direction. Understanding the Moldovan leadership's perception of Russian soft power could, therefore, form a basis for further analysis of whether Russian soft power has been successful. Maliukevičius' (2013) research on Russia's employment of soft power in the post-Soviet space employs discourse analysis to uncover the Russian views of soft power, finding insights into Russia's foreign policy discourse. Maliukevičius (2013, 63) states that discourse analysis 'helps to reveal the dominating Russian view towards soft power policy in the region'. Like Maliukevičius, this research draws on critical discourse analysis (CDA) but focuses mainly on the receptive side of Russian soft power policies. It strives to uncover how the Moldovan leadership has responded to Russian soft power. State leaders' perception of Russian soft power provides a basis for further analysis of whether soft power has influenced Moldova's policies. The goal of the CDA is to answer a set of questions. How have Moldovan leaders responded to Russian soft power? Have they accepted or denied the common identity narrative instated by Russia? Have they moved closer to Russia?

The literature review provides much-needed context for the CDA. As discussed in the introduction and literature review, Moldova lies between the EU and Russia, and both countries seek to pull Moldova closer. To revive its great power status and counterbalance Western influence in Moldova, Russia has used soft power means to (re-)establish a shared identity between Russians and Moldovans. Considering this, Russia would want the Moldovan leadership to accept the soft power narrative of the shared identity since it could indicate that Moldova is geopolitically moving towards Russia rather than the West. The data collected for the CDA includes statements by the Moldovan presidency between December 2016 and January 2022 (presidency of Igor Dodon and Maia Sandu), drawn from the official Moldovan and Russian websites containing specific key terms: Russian World, Moldova, history, language, culture, religion, and phrases closely related to these. These sources will provide a broad overview of statements on the various aspects of Russian soft power as discussed in the literature review.

The CDA analyses how Moldovan leaders refer to historical, linguistic, cultural and religious connections to Russia, taking into consideration the context of the audience, time, place and content of the text, as well as the meaning behind the text. Through this analysis, themes and patterns in the Moldovan leadership's statements can be identified. The CDA continues to code these themes and patterns based on whether the connections are positively or negatively perceived. From these themes, one could identify the central discourse regarding Russian soft power in Moldova, which provides insights into how the Moldovan leadership perceives Russia's soft power narratives. The sections on Russian soft power in this thesis discuss the themes identified in the statements by the Moldovan leadership, furthering the analysis of how Russia's efforts to extend its influence in Moldova have been perceived. The sections provide examples of statements and typically refer to the most striking statements regarding the acceptance or denial of Russian soft power.

Drawing on an in-depth analysis of Russia-Moldova relations and CDA, this research seeks to answer the questions; how has Russia used soft power to pull Moldova closer, and how has it affected Moldova's geopolitical stance vis-à-vis Russia? As discussed before, the analysis focuses on various aspects of Russian soft power (historical, linguistic and cultural, and religious) that it discusses in three sections. The sections commence with a historical and in-depth analysis providing an overview of established connections, after which an in-depth analysis focusing on more recent developments, including responses of the Moldovan leadership, follows. Lastly, the discussion combines the three sections and seeks to answer the central question, indicating whether Russia's soft power has been successful.

3. ANALYSING RUSSIAN SOFT POWER IN MOLDOVA

The following chapter analyses various aspects of how Russia uses its connection to Moldova as a soft power strategy. First, it analyses the historical connections between Russia and Moldova. Second, it focuses on the Russian language and culture in Moldova. Lastly, it analyses the presence of the ROC and the promotion of conservative values in Moldova. This overview provides valuable insights into how Russia has used soft power to attract Moldova and shape its behaviour.

3.1. History as Soft Power in Moldova

Russian President Putin often highlights the common past among Soviet countries, emphasising their shared experiences, and Moldova is not left out. Russia emphasises its historical connections to Moldova to pull Moldova closer and increase its influence. This section will first outline a brief overview of the historical relationship between Russia and Moldova, primarily focusing on times when Moldova was under Russian rule. This provides a base for further analysis of how Russia uses its historical connection to Moldova as a soft power means.

3.1.1. The Historical Relationship between Russia and Moldova

Throughout its long history, Moldova has belonged to various empires. Moldova, politically and culturally, stems from the Principality of Moldavia. The Principality of Moldavia was established in the medieval fourteenth century during the struggle against the Turks (Graney, 2019, 250). Moldavia was a Romanian principality from 1359 until 1538 (Worden 2011, 234). In 1538, the Ottomans gained control over Moldavia (Haynes 2020, 37). The inhabitants of Moldavia were mainly Orthodox Christians, and they wrote in Old Church Slavonic, providing the first connections to Russia (Graney, 2019, 250).

Tsarist Empire: Taking Control

The Russian Empire perceived itself as the defender of Orthodoxy, and Orthodox Moldavia was of great importance to it. The Russian Empire sought to enhance the status of Orthodoxy against the Ottomans and Western Christianity (Graney, 2019, 250). On its mission to save Orthodox Christians from Ottoman rule, the Russian Empire attempted to gain control over Moldavia multiple times. Eventually, in light of the Russian-Turkish War in 1812, the Tsarist Empire gained control over the eastern part of Moldavia, the territory that today makes up the Republic of Moldova and a small part of Ukraine. The Tsarist Empire renamed the region Bessarabia, and in 1818, it gained autonomy within the empire (Caşu 2015, 351).

As stated by Caşu (2015, 351), initially, an overwhelming majority of 90 per cent of the Bessarabian population was ethnically Romanian. However, under Russian influence, the ethnic composition of Bessarabia changed as many Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians and Jews from other regions of the Tsarist Empire moved to Bessarabia (Worden 2011, 234). Later, around the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, the number of ethnic Romanians had decreased to 50 per cent. Like other regions

in the Russian Empire, Russia also imposed Russification policies in Bessarabia, promoting the Russian language, culture, religion and law (Haynes 2020, 92). Due to the low literacy levels among the rural population, the Russification policies had a limited impact across society. Still, the policies were influential among the Bessarabian elite, and as a result, the Russification efforts continued to trickle down into society through government policies (Livezeanu 1995, 95). At the same time, because Bessarabia was under Russian rule when the Romanian nation-state was formed in the late nineteenth century, Bessarabia missed out on the formation of the Romanian identity, further decreasing Romania's influence in Bessarabia (Graney, 2019, 250). Thus, The Tsarist Empire seems to have significantly impacted identity formation in the Bessarabian region, leaving its mark on the population by promoting the Russian identity while limiting the influence of the Romanian identity.

Balancing Between Romania and the USSR

In the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, Moldova enjoyed a short period of autonomy (Livezeanu 1995, 97-8). In the aftermath of the Revolution, Bessarabia declared to establish the Moldovan Democratic Republic in December 1917. In March 1918, however, the pro-Romanian government incorporated the Moldovan Democratic Republic into Romania (Worden 2011, 234). The Romanian Kingdom attempted to reverse the Russification policies by enhancing the Romanian culture and language while at the same time diminishing Slavicness in Bessarabia (Graney 2019, 251). The territory that today is known as Moldova thus moved from a Russian identity back to a Romanian identity.

However, at the same time, the USSR historically claimed Bessarabia as part of its territory, and it did not recognise the region as part of Romania during the Interbellum (Caşu 2015, 351). In an attempt to regain the Bessarabian territory, the USSR established a Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) in 1924. The USSR established the MASSR on the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic's territory, the region known today as Transnistria (Rumer 2017, 1). Before, the area of the MASSR had not been part of the Moldovan principality nor the Bessarabian region ruled by the Russian Empire. Still, the USSR created the MASSR to diminish the credibility of the Romanian claim over Bessarabia and to possibly induce uprisings against Romanian rule (Haynes 2020, 129). While Russia had thus lost its claim over much of the Moldovan land, it continued to meddle with internal politics.

In 1939, the USSR and Germany signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, a non-aggression pact including a secret protocol in which Germany recognised the USSR's particular interest in Bessarabia. As a result of the pact, Romania, which had previously attempted to improve its relations with Germany, had lost its only ally in its struggle against the USSR. At the same time, the path to regaining control over Bessarabia was open for the Soviets (Mitrasca 2007, 140). In June 1940, the USSR demanded that Romania surrender the regions Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina within twenty-four hours, a demand which Romania met since it could not tolerate a large-scale conflict with the USSR (Haynes 2020, 133). Still, Romania, an ally of the Third Reich, later attempted to regain control over the regions. On 22 June

1941, as part of Operation Barbarossa, when Germany attacked the USSR, Romania regained its control over the regions (Haynes 2020, 135). However, the Romanian rule did not last long, since in 1944, the Red Army re-established control over the regions of Moldova and integrated them as the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) into the Union. The USSR started de-Romanising and Sovietising campaigns among its population, once again attempting to shift the identity of the population (Całus 2015, 12-3). Throughout its history, the Moldovan territory has thus faced various campaigns seeking to change its identity.

The MSSR: Sovietisation

Mass deportations and executions marked the first years under Soviet rule. Soviet leader Joseph Stalin was known to be suspicious of non-communist countries and their citizens, and since Moldova was under Romanian rule during the Interbellum and the Second World War (WW2), many of its inhabitants were considered a threat (Caşu 2015, 356; Haynes 2020, 139). At the same time, many Russians and Ukrainians moved to the MSSR, changing the republic's ethnic composition (Rumer 2017, 2). In addition, the USSR suppressed the Romanian identity once again, attempting to break links with Romania. The USSR highlighted an identity of Moldovans as part of the USSR that was distinct from the Romanian identity. For example, the USSR presented the Moldovan language written in Cyrillic as fundamentally different from the Romanian language in the Latin script, even though the languages were practically the same (Rumer 2017, 2). Moreover, the USSR attempted to Russify the Moldovan population. In order to spread communist ideology and values among Moldovan citizens, the number of Russian speakers and the overall literacy levels needed to rise. As a result, the USSR implemented Russification policies (Haynes 2020, 146). Additionally, while diminishing the Romanian influence, the USSR highlighted the commonalities between Russia and Moldova, asserting that the relations between Russia and Moldavia dated centuries ago Caşu (2015, 351).

Despite the Soviets' vigorous attempts to create a Soviet-Moldovan identity, it was not accepted among all groups of society and support for the advocates of Moldova's independence grew over time. By 1980, ethnic Moldovans made up the majority in the MSSR, yet they were underrepresented in government bodies and wealthier sectors and instead worked in low-paid positions. At the same time, the already poor MSSR struggled with an economic crisis, poor living conditions and a low life expectancy (Haynes 2020, 149). In 1989, the political movement Popular Front was formed and argued against the Russification of Moldova. Instead, they sided with Romania and argued that Moldovans and Romanians were ethnically the same despite the USSR's efforts to deny this (Kazantsev et al. 2020, 152-3). Protests led by the Popular Front in late 1989 demanded a change in the official language law, advocating for the return of the Latin script and the classification of the Moldovan language as an official state language. The demands were met, reintroducing the Moldovan language in the Latin script to society (Haynes 2020, 152). As discontent grew across various Soviet states, the USSR disintegrated,

providing opportunities for independence (Haynes 2020, 157). Moldova eventually became officially independent on 27 August 1991.

The Turbulent 1990s

Next to the creation of the Moldovan state, conflicts also marked the early 1990s. After the implementation of the last General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of openness and transparency (glasnost), nationalist ideals gained popularity among the Moldovan-Romanian majority (Caşu 2015, 367). For decades, the Soviet government had suppressed the Romanian and Moldovan identities to create a unified Soviet identity, sparking a solid nationalist response in the 1980s. The movement sought to bring justice to the Romanian people, divided by the redrawing of borders, seeking to reunite the Romanian people under one country. Ethnic minorities, including Russians, Russian speakers and Turkic Gagauz, feared losing their rights and connection to Russia in this new state and responded by establishing a counter-movement (Rumer 2017, 2). In August and September 1990, the regions Gagauzia and Transnistria declared autonomy and were no longer loyal to the Moldovan state. Instead, they claimed to be Soviet republics within the USSR (Całus 2015, 17). The Moldovan government attempted to regain control over the regions, which led to conflicts. The conflict in Gagauzia was resolved, leading to Gagauzia's autonomous status within the Republic of Moldova, which it has to this day (Wolfschwenger and Saxinger 2020, 356-7). The armed conflict in Transnistria, however, was not peacefully resolved. Russia played a vital role in the Transnistrian conflict. Seeking to support the pro-Russian republic, Russia positioned troops in Transnistria, claiming they were merely there as peacekeepers (Rumer 2017, 2). Moreover, Russia was a negotiator in resolving the issue between Moldova and Transnistria. As highlighted by Cantir and Kennedy (2015, 401), the Transnistrian conflict came to a halt with a treaty signed between Moldova and Russia, not Moldova and Transnistria. Russia thus played a significant role in the Transnistrian conflict and its legacy of a frozen conflict. Still, Russia has retained its influence in Transnistria by not officially recognising its independence. At the same time, Transnistria is dependent on Russia for its subsidised energy supply (Matveeva 2018, 731). Moreover, through passportisation policies in Transnistria and increasing the size of the Russia-aligned community, Russia has spread its influence across its borders without force (Makarychev 2018, 142). Russia's historical legacy in Transnistria is thus marked by security and energy guarantees to assure its status as a de facto state.

East or West: Integration Projects

Russia and the EU have attempted to draw Moldova closer through integration projects. Moldova first openly expressed the desire for European integration in 1996 when President Petru Lucinschi appealed to the European Commission and EU heads, stating that Moldova wanted to improve its ties with Europe (Graney, 2019, 252-3). The EU incorporated Moldova into the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2003, and political leaders continued to express the desire for further integration and cooperation with

the EU. An EU-Moldova Action Plan was established in 2004 and enforced in 2005. In the early 2000s, Moldova's primary foreign policy goal thus shifted from retaining strategic ties with Russia to EU integration (Cantir and Kennedy 2015, 404). In later years, Moldova further intensified its relations with the EU. Moldovan citizens were granted visa-free travel in the Schengen Area in April 2014, and two months later, in June 2014, Moldova signed an Association Agreement with the EU (Graney, 2019, 246).[1]

The AA did not cause any severe direct response from Russia (Matveeva 2018, 728). Still, as stated by Graney (2019, 258-9), it became vital for Russia to attract Moldova to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) after it had lost Ukraine in light of the Euromaidan revolution and the signing of the EU AA. Losing more post-Soviet states to the EU would damage Russia's image and limit its sphere of influence. At the same time, the Moldovan population was disappointed by the results of its deeper European integration, resulting in the election of pro-Russian Dodon over the pro-European Sandu in the 2016 presidential elections (Graney, 2019, 256; Matveeva 2018, 729-30). Dodon expressed anti-EU sentiments and a desire to reignite Moldova-Russia relations, and therefore, the Kremlin welcomed Dodon's election as president (Graney, 2019, 256). Moldova has been a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) since 1991 and acquired observer status in the EAEU in 2018 under President Dodon (Zhukov & Reznikova 2008; President of Russia 2018).

Next to this, as explained by Ambrosio (2019), the continuation of frozen conflicts complicates countries' prospects of further integrating with the EU and NATO. The EU and NATO are reluctant to approve new members that would entrap complicated conflicts into their periphery. As a result, it could be argued that the unresolved frozen conflict in Transnistria has served the Russian goal of aiming to prevent Moldova from further drifting West (Cantir and Kennedy 2015, 401; Graney 2019, 247-8).[2]

3.1.2. Turning History into Soft Power

Throughout history, but also more recently, Russia has attempted to use its historical connections to countries in its periphery to improve bilateral relations and increase its influence abroad. Malinova (2021, 430) states that politicians utilise the past '[...] to construct identities and consolidate groups, to mobilize support and discredit opponents, but above all, to legitimize power'. Russia and Moldova share a significant historical past, and Russia could utilise this connection to further its objectives.

Utilising Historical Connections

Using history as a means to increase influence is not new to Russia. In Soviet times, the USSR claimed that relations between Russia and Moldova had existed for centuries and spread this narrative through

[1] While this research focuses on Moldova's relations before the outbreak of the 2022 Russian invasion Ukraine, it must be noted that Moldova applied for EU candidate status in March 2022, and this was granted in June 2022, furthering Moldova's European integration path. (See European Council 2022).

[2] The Russian aggression in Ukraine that started in February 2022 has had significant impact on the relations between the EU and countries in Russia's near abroad. As a result, Moldova gained EU candidate status in June 2022 despite the frozen conflict in Transnistria.

propaganda. For example, the Soviets claimed that the Principality of Moldavia requested to join the Tsarist Empire during their fight against the Ottomans, a claim which, according to Caşu (2015, 351), is based on a false interpretation of old texts. Instead of requesting to join the Tsarist Empire, the Moldovan Principality merely requested assistance in defeating the Ottomans.

In recent years, Russia has continued to use its historical connection to other post-Soviet countries to increase its influence. A prime example of this is the annexation of Crimea. Russian nationalists have contended that the transfer of Crimea from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954 was an illegal base for Crimea to belong to Ukraine today (Hughes and Sasse 2016, 316-8). Thus, Russia uses history to justify its claim over the Crimean territory today. Moldova, particularly the region of Transnistria, has experienced an intense period of Russian rule. In Soviet times, the USSR even considered Transnistria one of the most well-integrated regions in its Union (Graney 2019, 251). This provides fertile grounds for using similar historical narratives to extend Russia's regional influence.

Acceptance or Denial of the Common Past

Before Dodon's presidency, Moldova-Russia relations were on the back burner as Moldova focused on further integration with the EU. However, under Dodon, Russia returned to the stage and became a priority for Moldovan foreign policy.

It seems that Dodon had broadly accepted Russia's narrative framing the connection between Russia and Moldova as age-old and friendly. For example, during the first meeting between Dodon and Putin, Dodon argued that it was 'a historic day for Moldovan-Russian relations [...] which date back hundreds of years' (President of Russia 2017). This statement is striking because of the previous leadership's lack of attention to Russia. Moreover, Dodon said this amid the West-Russia competition over influence in the near abroad in the wake of the Russian invasion of Crimea. Referring to their meeting as 'a historic day' indicates a shift in Moldova's position and a lack of worry about Russia's objectives. Additionally, arguing that their relations 'date back hundreds of years' suggests that Dodon thinks positively of Russia's connection to Moldova, even though Moldova has suffered under Russian occupation and has lost its autonomy numerous times. Furthermore, Dodon connects the common past to future developments. On the 26th anniversary of the diplomatic relations between Moldova and Russia in 2018, Dodon stated, 'I believe that our states have not only a glorious past, but also a worthy future' (Presedinte 2018b). Next to referring to their 'glorious past', once again ignoring the hardships that Moldovans suffered under Russian rule, Dodon contends that they have a 'worthy future', implying that Russia-Moldova cooperation is a given due to their shared past. These statements indicate that Dodon has shifted the Moldovan presidency's focus to strive for rapprochement with Russia. In the broader context of the competitive realist world, Russia has thus attempted to shift the balance of power in Moldova by actively engaging Dodon in its historical narratives to generate a pull towards Russia. Contrary, Sandu is more critical of Russia-Moldova relations. Unlike Dodon, Sandu regards Soviet rule

over Moldova as an ‘occupation’ (Presedinte 2022). The term ‘occupation’ connotes a feeling of involuntary submission, weakening the narrative that Russia and Moldova share a glorious and friendly past. Moreover, the term occupation dismisses any possible claims that the Moldovan state’s foundations lie within the USSR and instead indicates that the Moldovan state’s sovereignty was not respected. This distances Moldova from any Russian historical claims over its territory, culture, ideals and values. Sandu thus reversed the trend of Moldova’s presidency, distancing Moldova and weakening Russia’s efforts.

Shaping Historical Narratives

Additionally, Russia seeks to control and shape historical narratives to suit its international aspirations (Kurilla 2008, 1-2). While former CPSU Secretaries Nikita Khrushchev and Gorbachev allowed for more criticism towards the USSR’s history, Putin has attempted to reverse this. Instead, the Kremlin has tried to re-manage history textbooks and focus on ‘heroic history’ and contends that ‘dark pages of the national past are not proper subjects for school textbooks’ (Kurilla 2008, 2). Re-narrating history, Russia has glorified its victory during the Great Patriotic War (WW2) and highlights a common past between Russia and other Soviet states (Soroka and Krawatzek 2021, 355). Each year, Putin invites heads of government of ex-Soviet countries to attend the Victory Parade, which Dodon has also attended (Presedinte 2020c). To illustrate Putin’s sentiments, during the 2019 meeting with CIS Heads of State, Putin emphasised that the WW2 victory ‘was a victory of the Soviet people, and all of us had a great deal to do with it; all of us are heirs of this victory’ (President of Russia 2019b). With this statement, Putin seeks to unite people across various post-Soviet countries under a positive historical narrative. However, Putin fails to address that many countries suffered under the Soviet regime; many Moldovan families suffered during the de-Romanisation policies, including deportations and executions after the Soviets re-established control over Bessarabia (Caşu 2015, 356; Haynes 2020, 139).

The Moldovan leadership has acknowledged the horrors of the Stalinist deportations. During Dodon’s first Stalinist victim commemoration as president, he acknowledged the victim’s suffering. According to the independent Moldovan news medium IPN, Dodon called the deportations ‘a black page in our history’ (IPN 2017). With this statement, it seems that contrary to Dodon’s previous statements framing Russia-Moldova relations as ‘glorious’, he recognises the dark sides of their relationship. However, later Dodon attempts to create nuance, arguing that ‘there were good things and also bad things’ regarding Russian rule over Moldova (IPN 2017). Dodon’s imagery of ‘a black page’ supports this nuance; merely one page in the broader book of Russia-Moldova relations is damaged. While one page is ruined, the book still describes the ‘glorious’ past. Creating this nuance illustrates Dodon’s objectives. Dodon, as any politician would, aims to gain support among his domestic audience and, as a result, has to recognise the horrors of the past. Nevertheless, Dodon also wants rapprochement with Russia and refrains from harsh statements against Soviet rule.

Contrary, Sandu refers to the Stalinist deportations as a 'crime', framing the events as more severe than Dodon's 'black page' (Presedinte 2022). Unlike Dodon's reference to 'a black page' that does not hold anyone accountable, Sandu's reference to a 'crime' suggests that the perpetrator (Soviet leadership) must face justice rather than ignore it. Overall, Sandu is more critical of Russia-Moldova relations and openly addresses this. On Constitution Day, marking the creation of the first Moldovan constitution and, with it, the complete separation from Soviet rule, Sandu contends that while the Moldovan state developed under Soviet rule, 'the ideal of a state – a democratic, sovereign, and independent republic – only came true in 1988-1994' (Presedinte 2020b). With this statement, Sandu takes an opposite approach to Dodon. While Dodon glorified the Soviet past, Sandu glorified the democratic shift away from the USSR. The emphasis on democratic ideals indicates Moldova's orientation towards the West.

3.1.3. History: Conclusion

Much of Moldova's history overlaps with Russia's, and Russia uses narratives highlighting their historical connection as a soft power means. Some areas, like Transnistria, accepted the Russian soft power narratives, appreciating its time under Russian rule and actively seeking Russian integration. Additionally, Dodon has reiterated the narratives glorifying Russia-Moldova relations. However, at the same time, the Kremlin narratives do not resonate well among more critical Moldovans. Sandu's stance towards the pro-Russian narratives is more negative than Dodon's, framing the Russia-Moldova historical relationship as more severe and pessimistic.

3.2. The Russian Language and Culture in Moldova

Since Russia established control over the Moldovan territory, it has attempted to change the populations' linguistic and cultural nature, and as a result, the Russian language and culture gained ground in Moldova. Due to these historical legacies, Moldova is part of the RM (Yagodin 2021, 139). An analysis of the position of the Russian language and culture in Moldova helps understand Russia's soft power strategy. This section first provides an overview of how Russia imposed its language and culture onto the Moldovan people. This highlights the role of the Russian language and culture in Moldova throughout history and provides a basis for further analysis of the role of the Russian language and culture in Moldovan society today.

3.2.1. The Russification of Moldova

Tsarist Empire: The Beginning of Russification

When the Russian Empire gained control over Bessarabia, the region initially experienced a period of autonomy, and as a result, both the Russian and Romanian languages were used in official settings (Haynes 2020, 83). However, Bessarabia's autonomy and the unlimited language use in the region ended in 1828 (Haynes 2020, 93). The Russians attempted to change the linguistic and nationalist nature of the region through Russification and denationalisation policies (Baar and Jakubek 2017, 68). Moreover, the Russification policies promoted the Russian culture among Bessarabians (Haynes 2020, 91). From 1854 onwards, Russian was the only official language (Haynes 2020, 93). Additionally, the Romanian language slowly disappeared as a subject in school, which the authorities officially abolished in February 1866 (Baar and Jakubek 2017, 70). Moreover, universities demanded that applicants have significant knowledge of the Russian language (Baar and Jakubek 2017, 69-70). The Russification policies were particularly successful among the Bessarabian elites, and Russian became the primary language among educated and urban Bessarabians (Livezeanu 1995, 100). However, despite the efforts to Russify and denationalise the Bessarabian population, the Russification policies had a minimal impact on the lower class's identity due to low literacy levels (Livezeanu 1995, 94). The Romanian language and culture survived, particularly in the countryside, where Bessarabians continued to use Romanian as their everyday language (Baar and Jakubek 2017, 69-70).

Romanisation vs Russification in the Interwar Period

Language and cultural policies in Moldova took a turn with the arrival of the Romanian Empire in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution. The Romanians promoted a new national identity and made Romanian the standard language (Ciscel 2010, 16). The Romanian government introduced the Latin alphabet and transformed Russian schools into Romanian schools (Negura 2021, 438; Haynes 2020, 120). Moreover, the rights to study minority languages (including Russian) were limited (Negura 2021, 438). Still, Russian remained present in the school system due to the lack of Moldovan teachers and the limited number of textbooks in the Moldovan language (Negura 2021, 444; 446).

At the same time, in the MASSR (Transnistria), the Soviets continued their Russification policies while simultaneously promoting a 'Soviet-based Moldovan identity' (Ciscel 2010, 16). Attempting to emphasise differences between Moldovans and Romanians, the Soviets pushed for using a specific Moldovan (not Romanian) language, which in practice was almost similar to Romanian, only written in Cyrillic (Graney 2019, 251). With the new Moldovan language, the Soviets attempted to promote a Moldovan culture distinct from the Romanian cultural identity (Muth 2014, 31). However, when the majority of the population did not adopt the newly established Moldovan dialect, the Soviet authorities decided to temporarily reinstate the Latin script (Caşu 2015, 353). For the Soviets, language promotion was an essential means of increasing literacy, which was needed to further promote the communist ideology (Haynes 2020, 146).

Intensified Russification

Later, in the MSSR, both Russian and Moldovan were official languages. However, 'Russian was the first among equals' and more prestigious than other languages (Ciscel 2010, 16). Romanians acquired knowledge of the Russian language and shifted to Russian when speaking to Russians (Prina 2015, 60). Russian thus became the lingua franca in the MSSR, which Russophile citizens perceived to be a core part of their Soviet identity (Bloch 2014, 456). Slowly, the Russian language and culture started to dominate in the MSSR. The Russian language became compulsory in schools, while Moldovan was not, and the State University in Chișinău taught in Russian (Haynes 2020, 146-8). Additionally, television, news and books in the Russian language became increasingly present in Moldovan society (Haynes 2020, 147). Next to this, since 1944, the Latin alphabet was banned, and once again, the use of Cyrillic in the Moldovan language was promoted in an attempt to emphasise the differences between the Moldovan and Romanian identities (Caşu 2015, 360). Due to the increasing domination of the Russian language in state documents, education, media and daily life, the Moldovan/Romanian language proficiency in the MSSR was decreasing (Caşu 2015, 360).

Language Transition: The 1980s and 1990s

With the more open environment of the late 1980s came critiques on language use in Moldova. Nationalists argued for the return of the Latin script for the Moldovan language, leading to protests that eventually resulted in the implementation of the Language Law in August 1989 (Muth 2014, 27). The law defined the majority language Moldovan as an official state language written in Latin. Additionally, the law required all government employees' knowledge of Moldovan and Russian, and in 1994, Russian was no longer a compulsory school subject (Ciscel 2010, 20). Later, the 1994 Constitution specifically mentioned Moldovan, not Romanian, as the official state language, which could suggest that Moldova also distanced itself from the Romanian identity (Graney 2019, 252; Roper 2005, 503).

Throughout the 1990s, knowledge of the Moldovan language became necessary to find work, which complicated the life of the monolingual Russian-speaking population (Prina 2015, 61). Additionally, some Russian speakers felt their language had lost its significance and status (Prina 2015,

61). Still, the Russian language remained present in Moldovan society. Due to the lack of textbooks and teachers, the quality of education in the Moldovan language decreased, and as a result, Russian language schools, where teachers taught Moldovan as a foreign language, stayed open. Furthermore, Russian was still the dominant language to conduct business (Roper 2005, 504-5).

Some regions did not accept the Language Laws at all. Both the de facto state Transnistria and the autonomous region Gagauzia opposed the newly imposed Moldovan identity, as well as the linguistic changes that discriminated against Russian speakers (Wolfschwenger and Saxinger 2020, 359). In Transnistria, elites, with support from Russia, disapproved of the changes and opposed the implementations of the Moldovan government, eventually leading to its de facto independence (Baar and Jakubek 2017, 79). Gagauzia acquired autonomous status within the Republic of Moldova, and the Gagauz language, along with Russian and Moldovan, became an official language (Haynes 2020, 165).

3.2.2. Utilising Language as Soft Power

Language and culture are key aspects of Russia's soft power strategy. As the former lingua franca and prominent culture in the USSR, the Russian language and culture are unifying elements among citizens in the post-Soviet space (Rotaru 2018, 38). Additionally, two of Russia's primary soft power mechanisms, the Russkiy Mir Foundation (RMF) and Rossotrudnichestvo, were founded to preserve and promote the Russian language and culture and to improve Russia's image abroad (Rotaru 2018, 39). The RMF is also present in Moldova, with four centres at different Moldovan universities (Dimitrova et al. 2017, 17; 23).

Declining Popularity of the Russian Language

It seems that despite Russia's efforts to promote the Russian language and culture, the popularity of the Russian language in Moldova is decreasing. As Yagodin (2021, 140-1) argues, 'the Russian language lost its attractiveness among the youth'. Instead, Moldovan children choose to study English. This also becomes apparent from *The Children of Moldova Statistical Publication*, which indicates that the number of students studying Russian as a foreign language is decreasing while the number of students studying English is increasing (Statistica Moldovei 2020, 74, 88-9). Moreover, the number of institutions teaching Russian is decreasing while the number of English-teaching institutions is increasing (Statistica Moldovei 2022, 145). Overall, it thus seems as if the Russian language is losing its momentum in Moldova.

Russia is aware of the decline in the popularity of the Russian language. During a Council on Russian Language meeting, Putin even argued that a war is waged on the Russian language. Putin contends (President of Russia 2019a),

> '[a] war on the Russian language is […] being declared […] by the inveterate Russophobes […], but also by active and aggressive nationalists. Regrettably, in some countries this is becoming the official government policy. But what stands behind this policy, and we must

> realise this clearly, is again pressure and direct violation of human rights, including the right to a native language, culture and historical memory'.

The fact that the Council on Russian Language was established in 2014 to 'improve state policy in the development, protection and support of the Russian language' indicates that the Kremlin has feared the decline of the Russian language for a longer time (President of Russia 2019a). However, Putin's statement and its timing are interesting. While neglecting human rights issues for numerous years, Putin refers to the decline of the Russian language as a 'direct violation of human rights', indicating that he is concerned with such issues only when it benefits him. More of Putin's hypocrisy can be found in his argument that a war is waged. Rather than understanding the decline of the Russian language as a natural phenomenon of Russian losing its significance against other languages, Putin frames it as an aggressive policy by others. In the post-Crimea context, this is striking; Russia continuously downplayed the invasion of Crimea as a mere reunification of old territories, yet it does frame the decline of a language as an aggressive policy. Putin draws on the victimisation of Russia and human rights issues to present Russia's language promotion as a defensive strategy, justifying expansive measures like RMF centres in the near abroad.

The Persistence of Russian Language and Culture in Autonomous Territories

Even though the number of Russian speakers in Moldova is declining, the Kremlin still significantly influences the Russian-speaking population, particularly in Transnistria and Gagauzia. In both regions, Russian is still an official language; in practice, most of the population speaks Russian daily (Wolfschwenger and Saxinger 2020, 357).

As discussed above, the RMF is strongly present in Transnistria and promotes the Russian language and culture (Muth 2014, 28). O'Loughlin et al. (2016, 764) state that most Transnistrians view themselves as part of the RM. Next to promoting the Russian language and culture, authorities actively attempt to diminish the influence of the Moldovan identity. Transnistria has banned the Latin script, and instead, they write the Moldovan language in the Cyrillic script like in Soviet times. The use of Cyrillic promotes the idea of Transnistria being a separate entity from Moldova with a distinct identity (Muth 2014, 27). This draws the region closer to Russia while limiting connections to Moldova. Moreover, Roper (2005, 504) argues that education is 'an important agent of identity formation'. In Transnistria, the authorities closed various schools teaching in the Moldovan language, which has complicated the relations between Romanian- and Russian speakers in Transnistria and promotes the use of Russian.

In Gagauzia, Russian remains the most popular of the three official languages (Gagauz, Moldovan and Russian). Due to the high impact of the Russification policies in Soviet times, the Russian language continues to dominate the fields of education, media, and even politics (Cantir 2015, 268; Kosienkowski 2021, 335). Additionally, the Russian language is of higher prestige than the Gagauz language (Kirmizi 2020, 208). Next to this, Gagauzians have limited proficiency in the Moldovan

language, and as a result, many Gagauz people struggle in the labour market, particularly regarding positions in the government (Bloch 2014, 456). Instead, many use the Russian language as 'a mean[s] of communication in various domains such as education, trade [and] bureaucracy' (Kirmizi 2020, 205, 209). Popular Gagauz politician Irina Vlah actively promotes Gagauz-Russia relations and the Russian language. According to Vlah, Russia is the primary tactical ally of Gagauzia (Kosienkowski 2021, 330). Moreover, Vlah's administration mainly uses the Russian language when communicating (Kosienkowski 2021, 331). Overall, in Gagauzia and Transnistria, ties with Russia remain strong due to the everyday use of the Russian language.

Due to the close connection with Russia, Transnistria and Gagauzia often support Russian policies. As discussed before, Transnistria actively seeks Russian integration. The 2006 referendum in which 98% of Transnistrians voted to join the Russian Federation exemplifies this (O'Loughlin et al. 2016, 764). As stated on the RMF website, the 2016 Transnistria President Vadim Krasnoselsky stated that '[Transnistria] has always been part of the Russian World, and that is the reason why the region has never faced national conflicts' (RMF 2016). Additionally, people in Gagauzia positively perceive Russia; the vast majority have endorsed Russia's international objectives, including the annexation of Crimea. Moreover, many Gagauz people favour joining the EAEU and reject European integration (Kosienkowski 2021, 335; Cantir 2015, 278). The regions often draw on linguistic and cultural connections to Russia to explain their Russophile stance (Cantir 2015, 273). Thus, while the popularity of the Russian might be declining in broader Moldova, Russia still has significant influence in Transnistria and Gagauzia due to linguistic and cultural connections.

Moldovan Leadership and the Russian Language

Additionally, during his term as president, Dodon actively attempted to improve the position of the Russian language and culture in Moldovan society. Dodon occasionally spoke in Russian during official meetings, which the RMF highlighted in its reports (RMF 2020). Additionally, Dodon has repeatedly reiterated that the Russian language 'has the status of a language of interethnic communication' (Presedinte 2020d). It seems that with this statement, Dodon seeks to enhance the status of the Russian language. Russian is not an official state language, but with this statement, Dodon aims to improve the position of the language. At the same time, Dodon has openly opposed a proposition to grant the Romanian language the status of an official language (Presedinte 2017b). Although Romanian could also be considered a 'language of interethnic communication' and the differences between the Romanian and the Moldovan languages are minimal, Dodon has only attempted to improve the status of the Russian language. In the broader context of the West-Russia competition, Dodon's stance could indicate a shift away from Romania and the EU to Russia, attempting to reignite the status of the Russian language while ignoring Romanian. Dodon's actions and views thus seem in line with the Kremlin's aspirations to improve the status of the Russian language in Moldova while diminishing the Romanian influence.

None of Sandu's official presidential statements address the status of the Russian language. In her inauguration speech, Sandu spoke one sentence in Russian but continued to do the same in Ukrainian, Gagauz and Bulgarian, indicating that she perceives all languages as equal (Presedinte 2020a). Sandu has thus shifted the focus from promoting a special status of the Russian language to viewing it as equal among other languages, indicating a decline in Russian influence over the presidential position. While Sandu does not directly promote EU- or Western integration with this statement, she, like Dodon, does foreshadow her presidential term as a shift away from Russia.

Continuing Relevance of the Russian Language

Even though the 2014 Moldovan census indicated that merely 2.7% of Moldovans use Russian as a primary language, the true number of Russian speakers is much higher (Statistica Moldovei 2017; Prina 2015, 54). To use Dodon's words, Russian is 'a language of interethnic communication', and Russian is also widely used in business life (Presedinte 2020d; Muth 2014, 32).

Additionally, Russian culture continues to strongly influence Moldova (Matveeva 2018, 729). Russia owns much of the media in Moldova, and Russian social and traditional media remain popular (Boulègue et al. 2018, 31; Muth 2014, 32; Yagodin 2021, 141). Moreover, Russian television programmes are more popular than Romanian ones (Matveeva 2018, 729). Many Moldovans also consume Russian popular culture (Yagodin 2021, 141; Rotaru 2018, 39). By accessing Russian media and culture, Russian speakers obtain information different from Moldovan speakers; as Lavric (2017, 179) argues, they '[live] in a parallel space with the majority of the population in [Moldova]'. Russia conveys its pro-Russian narratives through Russian language media and culture, attempting to improve its image in Moldova (Rotaru 2018, 39). Due to their linguistic and cultural connection to Russia and their limited knowledge of the Moldovan language, many Russian speakers in Moldova rely on Russian sources when forming opinions. As a result, many tend to support integration with Russian institutions, such as the EAEU (Lavric 2017, 178). Media consumption in the Russian language and culture seems to promote Russia's image among compatriots. However, at the same time, Russia's efforts have also been perceived with suspicion. For example, in May 2015, Moldova prohibited Rossiia24 from broadcasting, indicating that Moldovans were aware of Russia's strategies to spread narratives (Rotaru 2018, 41). It thus seems as if Russia's linguistic and cultural soft power promotion is limited to already Russia-leaning audiences (Lavric 2017, 178).

Lastly, Russia actively promotes its higher education in Moldova. Wetzinger (2022, 211) states, 'Russia actively aims to establish itself as an international centre of higher education, promoting Russian education and student recruitment abroad'. Furthermore, the RMF and Rossotrudnichestvo established centres in Moldova to promote the Russian language, culture, and education. The centre attempts to attract Moldovan students to study at Russian higher education institutions (Wetzinger 2022, 212). In 2014, 25,000 Moldovan students studied at Russian universities. At the same time, six Russian

universities are present in Moldova and two in Transnistria (Dimitrova et al. 2017, 23). Through education, Russia can influence Moldovan students and extend its language, culture and values.

3.2.3. Language: Conclusion

Russian remains widely used across Moldova, and the pro-Russian sentiments amongst Russian speakers indicate that Russia's soft power strategy to utilise language to unite compatriots and promote Russia abroad has had its desired effect. Still, the Russian narratives mainly reach those who already support Russia. Keeping in mind that the number of Russian speakers is decreasing, the audience for pro-Russian narratives is shrinking, despite Russia's efforts to reverse this trend.

3.3. The Russian Orthodox Church and Conservative Values in Moldova

The Orthodox Church plays a vital role in both Russian and Moldovan society since most Moldovans identify as Orthodox Christians. Orthodoxy is thus a uniting factor between Moldovans and Russians. This section first analyses the history of Orthodoxy in Moldova and the connection between the ROC and the Kremlin, providing useful insights into how Russia could use the ROC as a soft power means. The section continues to examine how Orthodoxy impacts Moldovan society as a soft power strategy.

3.3.1. The Emergence, Repression and Resurfacing of Orthodox Religion in Moldova

Historically, Moldova has been positioned between various religions: Orthodox Christianity in the Russian Empire and the Romanian Kingdom, Islam in the Ottoman Empire and Catholicism in the Hungarian and Habsburg Empires (Kapaló 2017, 33). The region's religious orientation changed accordingly as various empires gained control over Moldova.

In 1812, Russia attempted to Russify the existing churches in Bessarabia, seeking to extend the Orthodox faith to its newly acquired territory (Kapaló 2017, 36). Additionally, as discussed before, Russia perceived itself as the protector of Orthodoxy; it strived to save the population from Ottoman influence by converting them to Orthodox Christianity (Zabarah 2011, 218). Moreover, the ROC attempted to improve Russia's image abroad (Solik and Baar 2019, 20). Like the RM does today, the ROC established centres promoting the Orthodox faith and Russia's influence and image in the region (Solik and Baar 2019, 22). However, the Russian influence over the region's religious affinity was shortly interrupted when Romania gained control over the region after the Bolshevik Revolution. Romania extended its religious influence, and the region came under the Romanian Orthodox Church's (RomOC) authority. Like the Russians, the Romanians attempted to transform society's religious affiliation (Kapaló 2017, 35).

After WW2, the spiritual battle between Russia and Romania lost significance since both countries had official atheist regimes (Grigore 2016, 99). In the MSSR, the Soviets instated church closures, and the number of churches declined from 1,090 in 1940 to 193 in the late 1980s (Avram 2014, 403). Moreover, religious education was banned, and religious buildings were destroyed or repurposed for other ends (Haynes 2020, 141-2). The few remaining religious figures also received education in Russia according to Russian ideals (Avram 2014, 403; Zabarah 2011, 226). Still, Orthodox Christianity remained on society's sidelines, often practised in private (Avram 2022, 146).

After the dissolution of the USSR, Orthodoxy regained its momentum in Moldova. The ideological vacuum left by the collapse of the communist regime provided chances for the revival of the Orthodox Church (Zabarah 2011, 216). As a result, the battle for religious influence in Moldova also revived (Avram 2014, 402). Today, Moldova has two Orthodox churches, both claiming the status of official Orthodox Church in Moldova: the Metropolitan See of Bessarabia (MOB) under the authority of the RomOC and the Metropolis of Chisinău and All Moldova (MOC) under the authority of the ROC (Zabarah 2011, 224-5; Ohle et al. 2021, 10). The MOC came under the ROC's jurisdiction in 1991 (Grigore 2016, 100). In 1992, the RomOC reinstated the Metropolis of Bessarabia in Moldova,

challenging the ROC's power (Payne 2015, 68). At first, the Moldovan authorities did not recognise the MOB, banning its activities for ten years (Curanovic 2007, 305). The MOB gained recognition only after a decision by the European Court of Human Rights forced the authorities to allow the MOB to operate in 2002 (Grigore 2016, 101-2; Curanovic 2007, 305).

3.3.2. The Orthodox Church as a Soft Power Mechanism

The Kremlin and the ROC

After the dissolution of the USSR, the Orthodox Church was the only institution that continued to have influence across the post-Soviet space (Rotaru 2018, 41). The Orthodox faith became an essential building block for Russia's national identity, as well as Russia's international aspirations (Amarasinghe 2021, 236). After all, in the post-Soviet ideological vacuum, religion became a prominent unifying factor among ex-Soviet citizens (Solik and Baar 2019, 23-4). Thus, next to a shared history, language and culture, religion became an important aspect of Russia's soft power strategy (Kosienkowski 2021, 327). Russia frames Orthodoxy as an alternative to the Western path. Similar to its historical objective, Russia has tasked itself to save others from falling prey to the West or the Antichrist (Ohle et al. 2021, 5). Thus, Russia phrases the Orthodox connection among ex-Soviet citizens as a uniting factor and a mechanism to spread anti-Western ideas to pull post-Soviet citizens closer.

Ohle et al. (2021, 4-5) state that the ROC is closely connected to the Kremlin. The ROC supports the Kremlin in its efforts to promote the RM. In fact, the Kremlin and the ROC co-founded the RM Fund, and Patriarch Kirill is involved in discussions on the RM, connecting believers from different regions under one 'Orthodox nation' (L'Amoreaux and Mabe 2019, 291; Solik and Baar 2019, 26). Additionally, the Russian state partially funds the ROC, and at the same time, the ROC supports political decisions by the government while opposing the opposition (L'Amoreaux and Mabe 2019, 291). Moreover, the ROC is deeply involved in Russian foreign policy as Patriarch Kirill often visits foreign heads of state (Solik and Baar 2019, 26). At the same time, the ROC supports the idea of the Kremlin as the protector of conservative values, and the two thus closely cooperate to extend the influence of Russian conservatism (Pertsev 2017). This indicates that the ROC and the Kremlin have similar interests and cooperate in achieving their goal of extending their influence among post-Soviet citizens. Still, as Soroka (2016) notes, the ROC and the Kremlin are not one and the same; one seeks to extend influence for spiritual and the other for geopolitical reasons. Their connection, however, is vital for understanding Russian religious soft power in Moldova since the Kremlin and the ROC use similar narratives to gain influence, and their strategies overlap in Moldova. The two also legitimise each other: the Kremlin uses the support of the ROC to improve its domestic and international image, and the ROC needs the Kremlin's support to maintain its prestigious position in society.

The Influence of the ROC in Moldova

According to Patriarch Kirill, the Holy Rus is not synonymous with Russia, as the Holy Rus includes all of the ROC, which stretches far beyond Russia's borders and includes people of non-Slavic descent,

including Moldovans (Ohle et al. 2021, 5). However, Kirill also notes that not the entire RM can be bound together through the Orthodox faith and contends that the connection depends on Russian religious and cultural traditions (Rotaru 2018, 41). While Moldova is excluded from the ethnic Russian boundaries (unlike Belarus and Ukraine), spiritually, it is part of the inner circle (Rotaru 2018, 4; Solik and Baar 2019, 29). As a result, Christian Orthodoxy is a uniting factor between Russia and Moldova and, therefore, a useful soft power tool.

Moldova provides fertile grounds for pro-Russian Orthodox narratives due to the high number of believers. According to the 2014 census, 96.8 per cent of Moldova's population identifies as Orthodox Christian (Statistica Moldovei 2017). Moreover, as stated by Solik and Baar (2019, 29), 63 per cent would argue that Orthodoxy is an important aspect of Moldovan identity. As argued by Avram (2022, 147), the support for the MOC (subordinate to ROC) is much higher than for the MOB (subordinate to RomOC): 97.4 per cent of Orthodox believers follows the MOC, while only 3.7 per cent follows the MOB. Additionally, the church has a significant impact on Moldovan society. As Rotaru (2018, 42) stated, '[t]he Orthodox Church is the most trusted institution in Moldova'. Furthermore, unlike the number of Russian speakers, the number of Orthodox believers seems to be increasing. Compared to the 2004 census, the percentage of Orthodox believers in Moldova increased by 1.3 per cent in 2014 (Statistica Moldovei 2017). Moldovan State will conduct a new census in 2024, and the results of this would provide useful insights into the current status of the Orthodox faith. Still, with these numbers, as well as recent academic work by, for example, Avram (2022, 146), it seems that the Orthodox faith has remained a unifying factor in Moldovan society through which the ROC can extend its influence.

Russia has attempted to extend its influence in Moldova through the MOC and the ROC (Ohle et al. 2021, 10). As a subordinate to the ROC, the religious figures of the MOC were educated in Russia and, therefore, influenced by the ROC. As a result, the MOC shares and reiterates many views of the ROC (Solik and Baar 2019, 29). Most Orthodox Christians in Moldova also acknowledge the ROC's supremacy (Rotaru 2018, 41). Additionally, the ROC has actively attempted to improve its image in Moldova through state visits by Patriarch Kirill in 2011 and 2013 (Rotaru 2018, 42). Patriarch Kirill and Dodon are closely connected and have met (Presedinte 2018c). Dodon even openly congratulated Kirill on his birthday, declaring that '[he] want[s] to assure [Patriarch Kirill] that the Moldovan people will always remain faithful to the Mother Church, as our fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers have preserved this fidelity' (Presedinte 2017d). Dodon's birthday wishes for Kirill indicate that the two share a close connection. Moreover, referring to the ROC as the 'Mother Church' suggests that Dodon accepts the MOC's subordination to the ROC, indicating that he sees Kirill as the prime religious leader. Additionally, Dodon appeals to tradition to justify his stance. The phrase 'as fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers have preserved this fidelity' suggests Moldovans cannot question the ROC's superiority due to tradition. This statement by Dodon highlights interesting aspects of his connection to the ROC and the flawed reasoning behind his appreciation for Russia-Moldova connections. Next to

this, during his inaugural speech, Dodon stated that '[he] will support the Church and […] those activities that will ensure the protection of Christian values within the Moldovan society' (Presedinte 2016). Dodon's inaugural speech is an interesting example because the first speech sets the tone for the remainder of the term. The strong focus on Christian values suggested Dodon's conservative stance later in his presidency. Moreover, the focus on conservatism and the Orthodox faith foreshadowed Dodon's rapprochement with Russia. In light of the competition between Russia and the West, Dodon's focus on conservative values seems to indicate that Russia successfully presented itself as an alternative to the West.

Searches on the President of the Republic of Moldova website on the key terms 'religion/religious', 'church', 'Orthodox' and 'ROC/MOC' do not provide any results of Sandu discussing religion in Moldova. Silence can speak louder than words, and the lack of results indicates that Sandu seeks to distance herself from religious affiliations and the ROC. Sandu recognises the high number of Orthodox believers in Moldova, yet, as proven before, Sandu attempts to distance Moldova from Russia. While Sandu cannot deny the religious connections between the countries, she can refrain from drawing attention to them. Once again, Sandu aims to reverse the Dodon's rapprochement with Russia, limiting Russia's influence.

Promoting Conservative Values

The Kremlin and the ROC promote narratives opposing Western values (Solik and Baar 2019, 28). According to the Kremlin and the ROC, the West threatens conservative and nationalist values. As a result, the Kremlin and ROC have used the RM to counter Western influence (L'Amoreaux and Mabe 2019, 291). For example, as a symbol of the West, the Kremlin uses the Orthodox Church to strongly oppose the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Queer (LGBTQ) people and instead promote a conservative stance regarding these minorities (Solik and Baar 2019, 32-3).

The Kremlin-promoted conservative values have also spread to Moldovan territory. The MOC actively argues against liberal values and Moldovan EU membership while promoting conservative stances. The MOC has thus been a valuable institution for spreading pro-Kremlin narratives (Solik and Baar 2019, 30; Boulègue et al. 2018, 33). As argued by Boulègue et al. (2018, 33), 'the [MOC] is highly influential, and shapes the hearts and minds of the population along anti-Western lines' and 'it promotes an anti-EU, anti-West narrative of traditional values that resonate well throughout society'. At the same time, the Kremlin uses Orthodoxy to prevent the Romanianisation of Moldovan society, pulling Moldovans further away from the EU (Solik and Baar 2019, 32).

The ROC's and Kremlin's push for conservative values seem quite effective in Moldova. Many Moldovans do not support the EU's trajectory in supporting LGBTQ rights. For example, pride marches promoting LGBTQ rights faced backlash and protests (Mitrofanova 2020, 114, 117). Furthermore, according to the Council of Europe (2018), 'prejudice against LGBTQ people is widespread in Moldova', and authorities have failed to address the issue. As a result, anti-LGBTQ sentiments remain

prevalent in Moldova. Moreover, according to RFE/RL (2022), the LGBTQ community is not accepted within Moldovan society, with 64 per cent of survey respondents arguing for excluding LGBTQ people from society. The Moldovan society thus seems to agree with the ROC's arguments regarding traditional family values, indicating that the Church is a valuable means to spread conservative narratives.

Additionally, Dodon openly supports the MOC and shares similar anti-western, anti-LGBTQ and pro-Russian values (Solik and Baar 2019, 34). A prime example of this is Moldova's hosting of the World Congress of Families in 2018. The Congress highlights the importance of traditional and conservative values. During his speech, Dodon stated that 'the institution of the family is exposed to erosion and destruction to a greater extent than any other social institution', highlighting the importance of maintaining the traditional image of a family (Presedinte 2018a; Avram 2022, 149). In addition, Dodon stated that '[a] family should only be regarded as an alliance between a man and a woman, a father and a mother', reiterating the anti-LGBTQ stance of the Kremlin and the ROC (Presedinte 2018a). Dodon openly expressed his pro-conservatism while ignoring social changes in family and LGBTQ issues, often seen as a Western phenomenon. The ideals expressed by Dodon align with the Kremlin's stance regarding these issues while opposing Western ideals. Thus, it seems Russia has pulled the Dodon away from the EU by promoting conservatism and anti-Westernism.

Sandu, on the other hand, expresses support for EU values. During the 2021 Eastern Partnership (EaP) Summit, Sandu stated that the EaP countries support 'common values' and that the Moldovan people 'elected a truly pro-European government, which believes in EU values' (Presedinte 2021). This is a stark contrast to Dodon's previous statements. Moving away from a strong focus on conservatism, Sandu heavily emphasises Moldova's support for Western progressiveness. Moldova's presence at the EaP Summit and Sandu's words indicate that Moldova is sliding more into the EU's periphery, shifting the Russia-West balance.

3.3.3. Religion: Conclusion

The ROC and the Kremlin share aspirations of promoting pro-Russian and anti-Western conservative values in Moldova and cooperate to achieve this. The MOC is by far the most popular church in Moldova, and as a subordinate to the ROC, the MOC reiterated many of the anti-Western and conservative stances of the ROC and the Kremlin. It seems as if both among many Moldovans and Dodon, the Church-instated narratives have been successful. Moldovans have opposed progressive and Western ideals such as LGBTQ rights, and Dodon has openly expressed his support for the MOC, the ROC and family values. Sandu has shifted the focus towards EU values; however, it is questionable whether the traditional Moldovan society supports this.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research established that Russia uses soft power to increase its influence in the near abroad to counter the Western influence and to re-establish its great power status. Russia has implemented a variety of soft power instruments in Moldova through which it seeks to achieve its goals. In Moldova, Russia has attempted to create a narrative around a common identity based on the two countries' historical, linguistic, cultural and religious connections. Still, Russian soft power has significant shortcomings, and its effectiveness is debatable.

The Shortcomings of Russian Soft Power

Russia's soft power strategy in Moldova could severely decline over time since Russia firmly bases its soft power on demographic features. Younger generations have not experienced life in the USSR and likely do not share Soviet nostalgia. Likewise, the number of young Russian speakers in Moldova is declining since young people favour learning English as a second language. Over time, Russia's connection to the Moldovan population is likely to decline. Still, religious connections have remained prevalent and could, for the time being, continue to serve as a soft power means for Russia. The data on Moldova's ethnic, linguistic and religious landscape primarily builds on the 2014 census results. The 2024 census could provide a basis for further research since a severe change in the number of Russian speakers or Orthodox believers could further limit Russian soft power.

Additionally, as the literature indicated, scholars like Hudson (2015) and Rotaru (2018) note that Russia's use of hard power significantly affects its image and increases suspicion of other countries. Russia's position weakens compared to the EU and NATO, which have significant hard power capabilities yet decide not to utilise them (Kennedy 2016, 513). While after the 2014 invasion of Crimea, Moldovans still voted for a pro-Russian president, the term after, a pro-European candidate was elected, and the current war in Ukraine could further distance Moldova from Russia due to suspicion of Russia's objectives. Future research could research how Russian soft power in Moldova has developed under a more pro-European leadership, as well as in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine.

The Effectiveness of Russian Soft Power in Moldova

This research examines how Russia has used soft power to draw Moldova closer and how it affected Moldova's stance towards Russia. The analysis above answers the first question. The remainder of this section analyses Moldova's policy decisions regarding Russia over 2016-2021, which could suggest how Russian soft power has affected Moldova. Focusing on state policy, this section highlights how Moldova's attitude towards Russia and Russia's power status developed.

The analysis indicates that Dodon accepted much of the pro-Russian soft power narratives. Moreover, Dodon actively sought to revive Russia-Moldova relations. Not even within a month of his term, Dodon visited Moscow, making him the first Moldovan leader to visit Russia in nine years (Presedinte 2017c). Dodon openly expressed his disappointment in Moldova's EU integration process and highlighted the importance of strengthening cooperation with Russia (Presedinte 2017f). Moreover,

under Dodon, Moldova gained observer status in the EAEU, making the European path for Moldova more uncertain. Judging from this, it seems Dodon's policies align with the Kremlin's attempt to pull Moldova away from EU integration, which was vital for Russia after Ukraine shifted towards European integration in 2014. Still, harsh anti-EU statements and EAEU membership aside, EU cooperation continued during Dodon's term. Instead of choosing between West and East, Dodon perceived Moldova as a bridge between West and East, between the EU and the EAEU and between NATO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (Presedinte 2017a, Presedinte 2018d). Judging from Dodon's statements and policies, he understands that Moldova needs the EU for its survival, yet also likes benefits from Russia. With the balancing act between East and West, Dodon tries to get the best of both worlds. Despite Dodon's reiteration of Russian soft power narratives, Russia has not managed to pull Moldova away from Western integration projects. Still, Russia-Moldova relations under Dodon revived, and Moldova's EAEU candidacy status could be considered a success for Russia.

However, Dodon's re-election campaign was unsuccessful, ending his presidency and the Russia-Moldova rapprochement. Instead, Sandu solely focused on EU integration, not meeting with Russian or EAEU officials. Unlike Dodon, Sandu speaks positively of the EaP and Moldova's European path, seeking to further Moldova's integration into the EU (Presedinte 2021). Moreover, although outside of the timeframe of this research, it is essential to note that Moldova acquired EU candidacy status in June 2022, indicating that the country is moving closer towards EU integration (European Council 2022). Moreover, Moldova has announced that it seeks to distance itself from the CIS (RFE/RL 2023). While intensifying EU integration, Moldova is neglecting Eurasian integration under Sandu. As the analysis indicated, Russian soft power narratives had limited impact in shaping Sandu's opinions, and her policies are no different, indicating that Russia has failed at pulling Sandu's Moldova closer.

Regarding Russia's power status, it seems that Russia's failed attempt to draw Moldova closer negatively impacted its status. As discussed before, Russia seeks to re-establish its position in the global political sphere and extend its influence to neighbouring countries to secure this position. The fact that Moldova has embraced the European path while ignoring Eurasian integration projects damaged Russia's image. It indicated to Russia, other countries, and Russia's domestic audience that countries would rather cooperate with the EU than Russia. Russia has thus failed to establish itself as an alternative to the West and shift the balance of power in its favour. Others recognise Russia's power and capabilities, yet they do not perceive Russia as a pole of attraction, damaging its status.

Overall, Russian soft power in Moldova has not reached its goal of pulling Moldova out of the European periphery and closer to Russia. While Dodon accepted the soft power narratives, EU integration remained on the table. Moreover, Sandu wiped Eurasian integration entirely off the table, shifting Moldova's focus to EU integration. Considering Russia's great power status, Russia has failed to establish itself as an attractive alternative to the West. While some individuals might believe in Russia's might, Moldova has shifted its focus towards European integration.

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