

# BULLETIN

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## New moldo-russian relations and the decline of the “soft power” strategy in the post-soviet area

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*The new Moldovan-Russian relations officially began on August 11, 2021, with the mysterious visit to Chisinau of the Deputy Head of the Administration of the Presidency of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Kozak. Known in the Republic of Moldova for a fateful document bearing his name and actively involved in the power reform process in Chisinau in June 2019, Kozak is the authentic expression of the decline of the “soft power” strategy in the post-Soviet space and the articulation of the new “realpolitik”. The time of his arrival, the agenda of the meetings and the content of the Russian official’s talks with President Maia Sandu and with some members of the Government were not made public, while the press release on the presidency’s website and Dmitry Kozak’s statements after the meeting with the head of state, must be interpreted only in a broader context that will mark the new Moldovan-Russian relations.*

### The rise: the strange history of the “soft power” strategy in the post-Soviet space

After Francis Fukuyama announced the “end of history” in an article in “The National Interest”, published in the summer of 1989, Joseph Nye introduced the concept of “soft power” in international politics through an essay published the following year (1990) in “Foreign Policy”. Defining power as the ability to obtain the desired results from other actors, Nye identifies three basic ways in which this becomes possible: coercion, money, and attraction. Thus, “soft power” means, above all, the ability to influence others through attraction, ie through culture, political values and legitimate foreign policy, in contrast to “hard power”, which involves influence through fear and coercion. Although Fukuyama acknowledges in his later works that he was too optimistic when he defined liberalism as the only dominant ideology of the future, Western culture and values nevertheless became an important component of world domination at the confluence of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

After the implosion of the Soviet Union and the decline of communist ideology, Russia failed to become a pole of attraction for the former Soviet republics and has imposed various integrationist projects in the post-Soviet area through coercion, local wars, and corruption. But the “colorful revolutions” in the former Soviet space, which took place in 2003-2005, demonstrated the power of values (liberal and democratic) and, as a consequence, led Russia to resurrect the “soft” dimension of its policy in this area, especially since high oil prices allowed for the allocation of substantial funds. Thus, a wide range of tools was developed, among which were: fake news and propaganda campaigns, the opening of suspicious cultural centers in many ex-Soviet states, or the use of

Metropolises under the canonical jurisdiction of the Russian Patriarchate. Through these instruments, it was attempted to portray Russia as a (conservative) civilizational alternative to Western (neo)liberalism and (implicitly) to Islamic fundamentalism and Asian authoritarianism. Therefore, in the absence of cultural attractiveness, Russia tried to develop an artificial one, by implementing a “soft power” strategy in the post-Soviet space, an approach challenged by Joseph Nye in a study conducted in 2013. Thus, the author of the term “soft power” was puzzled by the way in which “soft power” was understood in Russia, where it has become (only) a governmental strategy and not a natural and authentic cultural emanation.

### **The decline: from “soft power” to “hybrid war”**

Not surprisingly, the “soft power” strategy implemented by Russia in the post-Soviet space has failed. To be more precise, this strategy gradually became part of the “hybrid war” through which Russia seeks to reassert its control over the former Soviet empire, a war that formally began in August 2008 with the intervention in Georgia, and was re-confirmed by the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the war in eastern Ukraine. The watches worn on the right hand by some already unpopular Moldovan politicians, a gesture imitating Vladimir Putin, are among the few “cultural vestiges” of the short period of implementation of the “soft power” strategy, while the fear and coercion pertaining to its “hard power” remained Russia’s only feasible tools for operation on the post-Soviet space.

Moreover, there are at least three seemingly contradictory factors, which finalize the closure of the “soft” episode and stimulate a tightening of Russia’s positions in its “close neighborhood”, factors that can be represented geographically as follows: internal, regional, international.

- **Internal.** The authority of the regime cultivated by Vladimir Putin in the last two decades is in decline. Suffocated by corruption, with an average economic growth of 1% per year in the last decade – disqualifying for a transition economy, with political opponents and the free press being intimidated or poisoned, Russia cannot become a model of development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- **Regional.** The post-Soviet space has significantly changed lately. Ukraine, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova are increasingly involved in the process of European integration, as evidenced by the preferences of the electorate, or by the Memorandum on the establishment of the “Associated Trio”, signed in May 2021. Belarus is resisting with increasing difficulty against the pressure of modernization, while Alexander Lukashenko’s authoritarian regime can be maintained only with the military and financial support of Russia. The educated youth of Armenia and Azerbaijan communicate more in English than in Russian, and only the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, of which Russia is skillfully taking advantage, is hindering the integration of these nations into the Euro-Atlantic world. Central Asia is increasingly feeling the cultural (and not just cultural) influence of China, while Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and then Kazakhstan, have given up Cyrillic writing and switched to the Latin alphabet.
- **International.** Russia’s international situation has improved in 2021. Russia has partially managed to overcome international isolation and economic sanctions imposed by the Euro-Atlantic world. The US is looking for a new international identity, especially after the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the weakening of positions in the Middle East, while the desire to reset the strategic partnership with Germany and the concerns over China’s rise led to the signing of the US-Germany North Stream 2 Pipeline Agreement

and to the organization of the June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Biden-Putin meeting in Geneva. Following the Geneva meeting, Russia continues to strengthen its relations with China and is increasingly determined to impose itself in the “close neighborhood”. Finally, Russia manages (at least for now) to prop the Assad regime in Syria, being the only foreign actor that manages to simultaneously develop relations with Turkey, Iran, Israel, and the Arab world, and to, implicitly, maintain the OPEC + format.

### **The impact: The Republic of Moldova in context**

The results of the 2020 presidential elections and, in particular, the results of the 2021 parliamentary elections are not what Russia wants to see in the Republic of Moldova. The new parliamentary majority has declared its priority to be the internal reforms and the eradication of corruption, against the background of a pragmatic foreign policy. Still, during the meeting with the diplomatic corps accredited in Chisinau, Deputy Prime Minister Nicu Popescu, Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, said that the first priority of the new government in the field of foreign policy be the integration in the European Union.

Russia is no longer a pole of attraction for Moldovan citizens, at least not to the extent that it once was, but for Kremlin strategists this is not necessarily a surprise. On the contrary, the political realities in the Republic of Moldova are in line with the general trend of changes in the “close neighborhood” and which determine, along with two other factors mentioned above, the implementation of more coercive policies towards the ex-Soviet states. There is nothing left of the old feelings, while Kozak’s agenda in Chisinau and the new Moldovan-Russian relations must be understood in terms of three major dimensions: political, socio-economic, and strategic.

- **Political.** Russia will continue to keep its hand on the pulse of the political processes in Chisinau, even if it will be increasingly difficult for Moscow to control them, and Kozak has come to mark the territory and send the corresponding messages to the country’s president. Moscow cannot afford to leave the new government in Chisinau unattended, especially since foreign policy issues have been treated quite carefully so far, but it won’t hasten a visit by Ms. Maia Sandu to Moscow either. Thus, for those who understand, Dmitry Kozak conveys the message that a possible Sandu-Putin meeting “must first be deserved” and that Russia is waiting for the “meeting of conditions” on the side of Chisinau, and that, for now, the visit of person no.2 in the administration of the President of the Russian Federation is considered sufficient. It is not just a short-term political conditionality, it is a gesture that reminds us of the balance of power between the two states.
- **Socio-economic.** Russia is not interested in the success of a pro-European government in the Republic of Moldova and has enough tools to obstruct the smooth running of reforms and/or economic growth, including gas prices, the agri-food market, the Moldovan workers in Russia, etc. At the same time, Russia has the interest to protect its assets in the Republic of Moldova, implicitly the historical debt for natural gas (especially that of the Transnistrian region), Moldova-Gas actions, the energy infrastructure, the assets in the Transnistrian region, etc. Finally, socio-economic issues, such as the price of natural gas, are those that allow Russia to sweeten bilateral relations a little (the carrot), or, as the case may be, to make them more bitter. From the statements made public, socio-economic issues, including the topics of trade and migrant workers, have occupied a central place in the president’s talks with Dmitry Kozak and will certainly fill future bilateral negotiations with content. It is worth noting

that for Russia the economic-trade relations with the Republic of Moldova will mean, first of all, two issues: a) protection of Russian assets and of its share of the energy market; b) the use of economic instruments to obstruct the reforms and the development of the Republic of Moldova and/or to “correct” its strategic course.

- *Strategical.* Russia does not have the capacity to rebuild and maintain an empire within the borders of the former Soviet Union, where it could be able to allocate funds for the modernization of the road infrastructure in Ukraine, or for the increase of the minimum wage in the Republic of Moldova. Russia’s plans for the post-Soviet space, implicitly for the Republic of Moldova, are to turn it into a strategic resource (a security belt around Russia that hosts its military bases and a resource for economic growth) or, at least, not to allow it to become a strategic vulnerability (host to US / NATO military bases and economically integrated into various regional projects). Although no one is currently negotiating Moldova’s accession to the EU and NATO, or its reunion with Romania, a serious commitment to European integration on the part of the new Government could take Chişinău far from Moscow and reduce Russia’s influence in the area, implicitly through energy and social interconnection projects with Romania. This is where the “Transnistrian file”, the main strategic vulnerability of the Republic of Moldova, comes into play. After Leonid Kalashnikov, head of the State Duma Committee on CIS Affairs, Eurasian Integration and Relations with Compatriots, threatened that Russia would “strengthen the Transnistrian factor” were the new government in Chisinau chose an anti-Russian line, Kozak stated the Transnistrian conflict is an internal problem of the Republic of Moldova (the theory of “civil war”), while Russia can only try to help Moldova upon the latter’s request. In the short term, Russia will insist on continuing the “small steps” and demand that Moldova does not address human rights and security issues, call for the withdrawal of the GOTR and the transformation of the peacekeeping mission into a civilian mission with an international mandate. What is certain is that, if before the arrival of the Russian official in Chisinau, Ms. Maia Sandu repeatedly demanded the withdrawal of the Russian military from the territory of the Republic of Moldova, then in the talks with Kozak such requests were not made, at least not in the press release posted on the presidency’s website. From a medium and long term perspective, Russia may try again to impose a reintegration project, this time on a pro-European government, including as a way to torpedo the European course of the Republic of Moldova by connecting the left-wing electorate to the political processes in Chisinau.

### **Instead of conclusions**

Three basic issues need to be addressed in the context of the new relations between the Republic of Moldova and Russia. The first: Russia, determined by certain internal and external circumstances, will become more pragmatic and coercive in its relations with the states in the “close neighborhood”. Second: the Republic of Moldova, concerned with ensuring a favorable international and regional climate for the successful implementation of reforms, will insist mainly on socio-economic issues in relations with Russia and (most likely) will have to postpone for a period of time (1-2 years) major strategic themes. Third: the Republic of Moldova must not deviate from the reforms and the process of European integration, it must not give up the major road and energy infrastructure projects developed together with Romania, just as it must not give up the legitimate right to demand Russia’s withdrawal of troops and ammunition from the Transnistrian region.