

## RUSSIA'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN THE CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

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**Abstract.** *In the context of geopolitical tensions at the eastern border of the European Union, cultural diplomacy is becoming a symbolic battleground for regional influence, with significant implications for security and stability in the region. The use of this soft power, which complements traditional foreign policy strategies, is aimed at strengthening relations with partner countries, countering negative narratives or attracting/maintaining sympathy with states where the state in question has political, economic, etc. interests.*

*The context of the current world order, also generated by recent Russian-Ukrainian relations, is giving rise to numerous debates within international society and academia. Among these, an important aspect is cultural diplomacy's role in the current military conflict context on the EU's eastern border. We are considering the unique way, distinct from the approaches of Western states, of promoting Russia's national interests through cultural diplomacy.*

*The Kremlin has built a complex apparatus for realizing and disseminating information intended to be brought to the attention of public opinion and authorities in the international arena. These actions integrate actors from different levels and carry out complex influencing activities.*

**Keywords:** *security, cultural diplomacy, world order, war, strategy*

### **Introduction**

In recent decades, in order to face new geopolitical challenges, more attention is being paid to security in its three dimensions: individual, national and international. European, as well as global, states show concern when they observe the growing inability of their own institutions to effectively ensure national security (Constantinescu, 2013: 2). Consequently, it is necessary to identify a common line in order to ensure collective security. This vision should view the current challenges as a consequence of common vulnerabilities and threats, which require solutions of the same type or adaptation to each individual background. This must also be reflected in the sphere of states' foreign policy and, implicitly, in the way diplomacy is manifested, seen as an instrument for implementing the interests of the former, be they political or economic.

In a context where states have to respond to emerging challenges such as globalization, technology, transnational issues, power dynamics, etc., traditional diplomacy has to adapt, now supplemented by new forms of diplomacy: public, cultural, digital, celluloid, celebrity, etc.

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In this paper, we are mainly concerned with cultural diplomacy (CD), which is at the confluence with the other new forms of diplomacy, particularly public and celluloid diplomacy. By presenting a national image abroad, cultural diplomacy can overcome public suspicion of official messages and contribute to strengthening the national reputation. Domestically, it can support national social cohesion, especially when it targets ethnic minority groups. On the other hand, CD plays an important role in cultivating trusting relationships between countries and people, through cultural cooperation or the exchange of ideas and information, among others, to establish mutual understanding and find solutions. (Rodrigues, 2015:33)

During the 20th century, more and more countries have used the cultural factor to create a tradition of rapprochement, cooperation and exchange as a pillar of their foreign policies. In other words, nations, to a greater or lesser extent and in one way or another, have seen culture as an important component of their foreign policy, through which they influence their partners without resorting to military force. Thus, states have used culture to promote a positive image of themselves abroad, as well as to maintain international peace and stability (Goff, 2013:3) Scholars have noted that cultural diplomacy played a crucial role in protecting cities such as Paris or Rome during World War II. By promoting their cultural values and artistic heritage, these cities were able to attract international sympathy and support, thus demonstrating the importance of culture as a tool of influence in international relations (Ang - Isar, 2019).

However, it must be emphasized that cultural diplomacy is fundamentally a state activity and, although other non-state actors can (and should) participate, the prominent place of the state is obvious. Cultural diplomacy is also distinguished by the fact that it is supported not only by the appointment of professional diplomats, but also by the fact that they are accompanied by cultural attachés who skillfully promote the values of their nations' sciences and arts. These cultural attachés are sometimes prominent intellectuals, scientists or men of letters. (Guia Prático para as Missões Diplomáticas acreditadas em Portugal, 2022)

Among the actors of cultural diplomacy, promoters of cultural values and creators of important links between cultures, links designed to ensure global understanding and world peace, we list:

1. **Governments and state authorities** - coordinate and fund cultural exchange projects, support the organization of international events and encourage artistic mobility.
2. **Cultural institutions, national and international** - libraries, museums, theaters, cultural centers, art galleries, national cultural institutes (Romanian Cultural Institute for example), promoters of a country's language, culture and art abroad.
3. **Cultural diplomats** - ambassadors and cultural attachés, lecturers, directors of cultural institutes, etc.
4. **International organizations and NGOs** - (UNESCO for example) they support the protection of cultural heritage and promote education and art worldwide. Many cultural NGOs facilitate intercultural projects.
5. **Academic and educational institutions** - networks set up by universities, involving the development of international study programs, scholarships and mobility of teachers and students, projects, etc.
6. **Media and influencers** - essential tools in promoting a country's image and educating the global public about its culture and traditions.

### **Cultural diplomacy or propaganda?**

If we were to start from the equation in which Carmen Burcea includes cultural diplomacy, namely "the complementarity of two elements, *politics and culture*, enhanced by a third, *propaganda*" (Burcea, 2005:12), in which "culture is the attractive shell of politics, and propaganda is the instrument that ensures their cohesion" (Burcea, 2005:12), then it should not be surprising that in recent years cultural diplomacy is considered a force in the foreign policy of every state. Nicolae Iorga, a vehement critic of public manipulation and the use of propaganda techniques to influence people's perceptions and feelings for political purposes, considered propaganda "a dangerous tool in the hands of those who wanted to gain power" (Iorga, 1926:463). The Romanian historian also emphasized that in the face of effective propaganda it is essential that citizens retain the ability to judge objectively and to resist unwarranted influence.

Although nowadays most of the talk is about "soft power" or cultural diplomacy, and *propaganda* was rather the motto of the inter-war period, Russia is among the countries that combine the two concepts in its foreign policy actions, especially in the current geopolitical context. Cultural diplomacy actions, reflected in the promotion of Russian language and culture through various institutions and programs such as the government agency Rossotrudnichestvo or the Pushkin Institute, are complemented by the other component of Russia's foreign strategy, namely the use of media and platforms to promote an image of Russia that is favorable to Putin's regime and necessary to justify military actions to a global audience. Therefore, while cultural diplomacy has a positive impact in shaping and strengthening Russia's foreign policy, propaganda can include misinformation, manipulation and the creation of narratives that serve its political purpose (Rataru, Iarovoi, 2019).

The European area is the Kremlin's clear target, where the problem of Russian propaganda and disinformation is reaching impressive proportions. EU diplomatic chiefs have taken numerous actions to combat Russian propaganda. For example, in 2016, Federica Mogherini stated in paragraph 8 of the European Parliament resolution of November 23, 2016: "The Russian government uses a wide range of means and tools, such as special think tanks and foundations (such as Ruskie Mir), special authorities (Rossotrudnichestvo), multi-language TV channels (such as Russia Today), false democratic values, to divide Europe, gain domestic support and give the impression that the EU's Eastern Neighborhood states are failed states." (European Parliament Resolution, 2016) The same resolution notes that Russia invests significant financial resources in its disinformation tools: political parties, organizations within the EU, in order to undermine political cohesion (European Parliament Resolution, 2016).

### **Russia between cultural diplomacy and propaganda**

We said at one point in the above lines that the media is one of the basic tools for implementing cultural diplomacy. This role also applies to propaganda. Our study aims to bring forward elements of cultural diplomacy, but also of Russian propaganda on the favourable terrain of disinformation in Eastern Europe, especially in the Republic of Moldova. Russia's aim is to influence public opinion and undermine confidence in state institutions and to create a climate favourable to the geopolitical interests of Moscow, which continues to consider the former Soviet states as sister countries, holding itself *responsible*. Russia uses a broad spectrum of techniques and channels of communication to influence Moldova, which includes the media, social networks, education and direct action at the political level (Security Sector Governance in Moldova, 2024: 34).

### 1. *Here are some of the levels through which Russia conducts its propaganda in Moldova:*

➤ **Media** - Broadcasters such as NTV Moldova, RTR Moldova, or Pervii Canal are often criticized for broadcasting news and programs that support Russian narratives. These channels tend to promote negative images of the European Union and NATO, emphasizing the possible dangers of Moldova's integration into these structures and portraying Moscow as the protector and guarantor of the country's stability. Local media, especially in Transnistrian regions or in some areas with a majority of Russian speakers, can also be a vehicle for propaganda.

➤ **Online platforms** - controlled or influenced by Russia can disseminate disinformation and narratives favouring Kremlin interests, especially during elections or political crises in general. Social media influence campaigns are coordinated by government agencies or activist groups that create and distribute content to manipulate public opinion.

➤ **Campaigns to manipulate national and ethnic sentiment** - especially in Transnistria, Găgăuzia and among the Russian-speaking community. Russia is trying to promote an ideological model that claims Moldovan identity as closely linked to Russian traditions and culture. Russia also continues to support the mythology of an "independent Moldovan state" which, in the Kremlin's view, should work more closely with Russia and avoid integration into international structures such as the European Union or NATO. Linguistic fragmentation with emotional links to the history of the Russian Federation and the permeability of political manipulation with social and cultural tools have, over several decades, fuelled distrust in democratic institutions and the relativism of European values, which are opposed to communist ones.

➤ **Political and financial contacts:** Over the years, Russia has provided financial, political, and logistical support to political actors in Moldova who favor close relations with the Kremlin. These ties allow Moscow to influence Moldova's internal and external political decisions.

➤ The ultimate aim of these actions is to keep Moldova within Russia's sphere of influence, to prevent its integration into the European Union and NATO, and to weaken the authority of the Moldovan state.

### 2. *Strategies used:*

➤ **Disinformation and fake news:** By creating and distributing false or distorted news on social platforms, Russia attempts to create confusion and polarization among the Moldovan population. Such news may include conspiracy theories, misinformation about Moldova's domestic politics or the international situation.

➤ **Fake accounts and "botnets":** The creation of fake accounts that post messages in support of Russia or disseminate misinformation is a widespread practice. These accounts are used to amplify pro-Kremlin messages and minimize the impact of criticism against the Russian regime.

➤ **Influencers and coordinated campaigns:** In some cases, Russia may use local influencers or youth groups to promote a pro-Kremlin view. These campaigns are often subtle and focus on issues such as Moldovan sovereignty or criticism of the authorities in Chisinau and Brussels.

### 3. *Russia's influence in the identity building project of the Republic of Moldova*

Russia has played a significant role in this process, since on the one hand it had an impact on the language, culture and politics of the Republic of Moldova during the Soviet period, and on the other hand it continues to be a major power in promoting a Moldovan identity closely linked to Russian history and traditions, even after independence in 1991. By promoting and supporting the Russian-speaking identity in the Republic of Moldova, or the Moldovan identity, it has the clear aim of opposing Moldova's unification with Romania and its orientation towards the European Union and NATO.

### 3.1. History of the Republic of Moldova in the pro-Russian press. Moldovenism

In our analysis of the press in the Republic of Moldova we have identified numerous pro-Russian-oriented newspapers (*Karadeniz*, *Moldova Noastră*, *Moldova Suverană*, *Panorama*, *Sputnik Moldova* - the state news agency of the Russian Federation, which has an extensive network in the now independent republics that were formerly part of the Soviet Union, *Nasha Gazeta*, *Argumenty i Fakty*) and also numerous television channels, subsidiaries of Russian TV stations or local channels (*NTV Moldova*, *RTR Moldova*, *Perviy Kanal Moldova*, *TV 7*, *Prime TV*). It is very difficult for public opinion in Moldova to look objectively at the information transmitted by these media channels, all the more so as these sources of information are propagandistic in a way that seems to favor the Moldovan population. "After 1991, Moscow has constantly pursued its own strategy of keeping Soviet children in its bosom, with or without their will. It has a vital interest in not letting the West take over what it thinks is within its sphere of influence. If it cannot, in totality, get Ukraine, Moldova or the countries of the South Caucasus to give up their turn to the West, Russia is also capable of destroying them militarily so as to make them irrelevant to the West. The EU, assiduously courted by Ukraine and Moldova, is looking for ways to sustain its engagement with these states but is not taking any decisive steps for fear of a repeat of a new Ukraine. Attracting these countries to Russia or the institutional West involves more than mere geographical proximity. In the eyes of Moldovans, Europe, unlike Russia, does not have the trump cards of shared history, culture, religion, economic ties, and unique domestic political circumstances of each country" (Constantin, 2024).

Russia has continued to promote the concept of "Moldovenism," which essentially suggests that Moldovans are not a branch of the Romanian nation, but a distinct nation with its own culture and history. In this sense, Russia has advocated a historical view that Bessarabia has always been a separate region from Romania, and that its history and identity should be considered distinct. This was a direct response to the tendencies in the Republic of Moldova to promote ties with Romania and Romanian culture, especially in a context where a significant part of the Moldovan population feels connected to Romania and the Romanian language. (*Republica Moldova: o istorie fluidă a unui tărâm de frontieră*, 2015)

Russia's new foreign policy concept, approved by Presidential Decree on March 31, 2023, by Vladimir Putin, defines the role of the Russian state on the present international stage. "Russia isolates itself from the world in a 'civilization' that fits nowhere - being by definition self-sufficient. The description of the world offered in the Concept confirms that, indeed, for Putin's Russia there is no international space for it to fit into and that Russia does not want to live by the rules it does not set, and that Russia is the one that will decide how and by what means it will set its own rules" (Țăranu, 2023).

Elaborating on this topic at a roundtable dedicated to the issues of history and its perception in the media, the well-known Russian political scientist and analyst Nikolai Zlobin, director of Russian and Asian programs at the US Global Security Institute, noted that the main battle of our time is the "battle for minds" (Russian World portal editorial staff, 2024). This is well understood by politicians who use history and emotional attitudes to the Russian past for their own purposes. At the same meeting, representatives of the Ruskiyi Mir Foundation emphasized "Moldova's struggle with the past", based on education and teaching the history of the Moldovan, not the Romanian, lands in schools, the importance of monuments and symbols of the Soviet period, in parallel with the policy of the liberals, who are trying to fight through the mass media and school textbooks.

### *3.2. Russian language and celluloid diplomacy*

In analysing the influence of Kremlin leaders on the media in the Republic of Moldova, it is necessary to take into account the local culture and the Russian-speaking population. Knowledge of the Russian language allows direct consumption of media products from the Russian Federation, without the need for adaptations, translations, i.e. the information is not filtered and fake-news reaches the press agenda more easily. In this context, not only news, talk shows, but also entertainment programs play an important role. We should also take into consideration the actions of celluloid diplomacy, which involves films dubbed into Russian, in which visions or even global problems are presented through the prism of conspiracies promoted by the Russian Federation, with the aim of political, cultural, religious, etc. manipulation. Two films considered to be Russian propaganda were to be shown in cinemas in Romania, not only in the Republic of Moldova: *The Challenge* (2023) and *Time of the First* (2017) (Despa, 2024). The particular target of Russian manipulation are Russophiles, and the post-communist nostalgia, which provokes frustration, subjects the population to information chaos, making it even more vulnerable. The media is a strategically sensitive sector, and appealing to emotional events allows the Kremlin leaders' policies to have the desired effects.

### *3.3. The role of civil holidays and the use of emotional events (historical commemorations or international conflicts)*

Referring to the history of the Russian Empire and, later, the USSR, is the version of Russian state propaganda that is still current today in the Republic of Moldova. The project of identity construction of the Republic of Moldova alongside Russia, by emphasizing world events such as the Great Patriotic Defence War (1941 - 1945) is not only a means of manipulation through emotional attachments, but also through the identity "filter", which is a historical falsehood. Referring to such factors in a divided society is manipulation supported directly or indirectly also by local authorities through measures not implemented over several years. The event of May 9, which marks not only the end of the Second World War, but also Europe Day, is a divisive issue. On the one hand pro-Russian political actors who promote polemics around the Great Victory and their supporters, and on the other hand pro-European political actors who promote the ideas of a democracy within the European Union. It is necessary to mention that on June 23, 2022, the Republic of Moldova obtained the status of an official candidate state for accession to the European Union. In this context, with unfiltered information, the media agenda becomes the Kremlin's propaganda machine. They promote historical falsehoods by omitting details, thus combining several incomplete truths into a controlled, deeply

emotional message, transformed into a state doctrine promoted among the population and even in the education system. According to experts, the ambiguous attitude towards Victory Day is due to the fact that Russia, under Vladimir Putin's leadership, has completely "privatized" this holiday, and any association with this day is interpreted as an item on the pro-Russian agenda, implicitly becoming a propaganda tool.

One of the signs of such a "privatization" of the holiday is the invention of new rituals and ceremonies that did not exist before the 2000s, such as the St. George's ribbon, the orange and black ribbon (Vasilache, 2022). This is the brainchild of Surkov - a former deputy head of the Russian Presidential Administration, considered the Kremlin's main "ideologue". The orange and black ribbon was used as a badge of honor by Soviet sailors during the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The ribbon was called "Guards" and began to be used with Soviet orders, for example, with one of the most popular medals "For Victory over Germany in the Great Patriotic War" and with the Order of Glory of all ranks. (Vasilache, 2022)

The "St. George" campaign was launched in 2005, on the eve of Victory Day, when orange and black ribbons began to be distributed (Dubasova, 2024). In 2014, the St. George ribbon was used by pro-Russian activists in Donbass. And with the beginning of a full-scale war in Ukraine, the ribbon, with the Z-sign, became one of the symbols of the Russian invasion. In the Republic of Moldova, the production, distribution and wearing of the St. George's ribbon is sanctioned. This decision was introduced on the initiative of the Action and Solidarity Party in 2022. However, this did not prevent the pro-Russian opposition from using black and orange balloons on Victory Day, and protest participants wore black and orange clothes. Many people completely ignored the ban, including the former president of Moldova, socialist leader Igor Dodon. In 2022, he said that the St. George's ribbon would become a symbol of the opponents of the current Moldovan President Maia Sandu. The ribbon has not become such a widespread symbol, but most of the fines issued by police for wearing it have been overturned by the courts. Including in the case of Igor Dodon. The fact is that in order to recognize the crime, it is necessary to prove that the ribbon was worn specifically as a sign of support for the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, and on May 9 this cannot be proved. (Borodin, 2024)

#### 3.4. *The role of religion*

When it comes to Russian propaganda, the religious element is extremely important. In the Republic of Moldova, some parishes belong to the Moldovan Metropolitanate and are subordinate to Moscow, while others are subordinate to Bucharest. The autonomous influence of the Orthodox Churches on public opinion cannot be denied, but their ability to mobilize the masses should not be exaggerated either. Analyzing from this point of view the magnitude of the changes in the Republic of Moldova, we can see that religious developments mirror political ones. Thus, the Orthodox hierarchy as a whole is following the general line imposed by the political powers. Taking into account the current internal and external situation, it was proposed that all churches should come under the jurisdiction of Orthodox parishes subordinate to Bucharest, which has aroused controversial reactions from political groups that are Russia's clients. The new draft law thus served as a means to promote religious-based polemics. Youth activists and other representatives of the Victoria political bloc organized several protests across the country, during which they expressed their indignation at the pressure they believe the authorities are exerting on the Moldovan Archdiocese (Gradinaru, 2024).

The demonstrations were aimed at protecting traditional values and the Orthodox Church, while campaigning against attempts to split it. Holding placards with the inscriptions "One Church - One Nation", "For peace in every church" and "Sandu, don't touch our church", "EU will make you pray to other gods", the protesters demanded respect for the unity and autonomy of the Orthodox Church. One of these rallies took place in Chisinau, in front of the Moldovan Metropolitan. The participants in the demonstration also drew attention to the fact that lately the pressure from the authorities on the Orthodox Church has increased and therefore all Orthodox Christians must unite in the struggle for the values of a "healthy" society. In fact, their slogans are elements of manipulation, since accession to the European Union does not imply an exchange of religion and does not promote other values, nor does it affect the maintenance of the values of the people („Sandu, nu atinge biserica noastră”, 2024).

Analyzing the Russian propaganda, we cannot exclude the political aspects and illicit money that feed the propaganda apparatus of the regime promoted by the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova. The funds obtained through legal and illegal mechanisms from the Kremlin leaders or oligarchs, coupled with the double game of local authorities, which are the main emitters of fake-news, represent a failure of the public media, and the main arbiters who should sanction - the Audiovisual Councils - do not regulate the situation, as they are politically enslaved. In this context, the new democracies on the frontline of combating Russian propaganda, or the current government, is forced to quickly invent new means and models to combat fake news. On December 16, 2022, the Commission for Exceptional Situations suspended the broadcasting licenses of six TV stations during the state of emergency: Accent TV, NTV Moldova, Orhei TV, First in Moldova, RTR Moldova and TV6. On the proposal of the Information and Security Service (SIS), the Commission for Exceptional Situations (CSE) suspended the broadcasting licenses of six more TV stations (Orizont, Prime, Publika TV, ITV, Canal 2, Canal3) on the grounds that the Russian Federation would try to influence the 2023 local elections in Moldova (Coptu, 2023).

### **Conclusions**

Since the Soviet period and continuing after 1991, Russia has made extensive use of media and educational channels to promote a vision of Moldovan identity that relates more to the Soviet past than to Romanian traditions. Russian television, radio and online media have been used to spread narratives favoring a distinct "Moldovan" identity, often in opposition to the image of Romania. Russia also supported educational initiatives in Moldovan schools, including in Transnistria, that promoted Russian-language teaching and Soviet values. These channels have had a significant impact on public perceptions, particularly in the eastern regions of the country and in Russian-speaking areas, where a strong link with Russia and the Soviet past has been cultivated.

Russia's involvement in Moldova's identity construction project has therefore been and continues to be a significant influence. From the policy of Russification during the Soviet period, to the continued support for separatist regions and the advocacy of a pro-Russian Moldovan identity, Russia has had a profound impact on the cultural and political orientations of the Republic of Moldova. However, this identity project is in constant competition with pro-Romanian and pro-European tendencies aimed at integrating Moldova into international structures such as the European Union. Moldova's national identity thus remains a battleground between different geopolitical forces, and Russia's influence continues to play a significant role in this dynamic.



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