

The European Perspective of the Republic of Moldova under the Foreign Sociocultural Influence (The case of Russia and Turkey).

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Abstract:

This article examines the sociocultural influence of foreign states on the Republic of Moldova's European trajectory. The research aims to identify the nature and forms of this influence and to detect its implications for Moldova's chosen European course. The study employs a mixed methodology combining a review of relevant literature with field research. In this context, sociocultural influence is understood as the impact of shared values and norms on social perceptions and behavior which, when exercised by external actors, functions as a soft tool for advancing political interests. From this perspective are analyzed Russian and Turkey sociocultural influence on the Republic of Moldova, described its policies and mechanisms, highlighted Moldova governmental institutions approach to strengthen national resilience and European integration process.

Keywords: foreign policy, group identity, kin-state politics, national identity, social and cultural influence (cognitive attack)

INTRODUCTION

Since its independence the Republic of Moldova has been the part of so called “shared space” being geopolitically set between different international players and hostage of their various interests and influences. Now with the beginning of the war in Ukraine the republic has found itself caught in the center of the escalating confrontation between the Western democracies and some autocratic countries for the redistribution of the sphere of influence having direct impact on Moldova. The republic has made its choice in favor of the European integration and recently got the status of candidate. The Constitutional referendum on EU accession held October, 20th 2024 has confirmed this choice of the majority of Moldovan citizens. Yet, it finds no support among all the Moldovan citizens since the multiethnic population of the country continues to be torn under significant external influence, behind which it is easy to lose the value of one's own growth and prosperity.

This research is touching upon the problem of the sociocultural influence of the Russian Federation and Turkey on the Republic of Moldova European integration process. Actually these two countries are the kin-states maintaining strong ethno-cultural or ethno-religious bonds with the ethnic minorities of Moldova. The research aims at identifying the character and extent of their influences and determining the potential risk it can bring for the future development of the country.

Sociocultural influence in this research is understood as the impact formed by social and cultural values, norms and behaviors adopted by groups of people and shaping how people perceive the world and interact within it. Being exerted by external players of international arena this is an outside influence referred to the policies and activities of international actors (states and organizations) aimed at promoting their interests in the territory of another state. Sociocultural influence represents a good instrument for gradual and soft installing of a political one. In the modern world of increased interconnectedness and digitalization the rapidity and scale of social-cultural influence are enormously increasing. Countries are becoming less and less resilient to such an impact

on their way to be secured from malign interference and unfortunately they only start to introduce legislative tools to protect themselves.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The main method used in the research is document analysis. A comparative method is used to compare Turkish and Russian sociocultural influence. In carrying out the study a variety of materials were examined. There were used the results of political researches conducted by national and foreign experts, the results of sociological studies of national centers. There were analyzed reports of European analytical centers, working papers and political reviews of international governmental and non-governmental organizations. Also, the subject of analysis became legislative documents, statistical data and information from press services.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In its exertion of sociocultural influence over the population of Moldova Russia has largely used the peculiarities of Moldova's Soviet heritage – a wide use of the Russian language, a certain interpretation of historic events, broadly spread Orthodox faith values. Russia is actively promoting the concept of Russkiy Mir on the territory of the republic. This concept presupposes the maintenance and development of Russian cultural and spiritual bounds including not only “compatriots living abroad, but also all foreign citizens who speak, learn and teach Russian and “have taken the cultural and spiritual component of this world as their own” [1]. Russkiy Mir Foundation has encouraged the use of the Russian language as the language of inter-ethnic communication and has actively engaged in the education system organizing Russian language courses for experts and teachers. [2, p. 25]. Also, since 2002, a representative office of Rossotrudnichestvo has been operating in Moldova, whose activity is to develop cultural, educational, scientific and informational ties between countries. It provides consulting services in the field of civil, political, social, cultural and economic rights. [3, p. 94].

Another important instrument of Russian influence is the Moldovan Orthodox Church which is subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church. In Moldova the MOC is the most trusted institution shaping the views of Moldovans not only in the religious sphere, but in social and political ones. It cultivates traditional values strongly opposing any changes endangering them: anti-discrimination law, the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating influence against women and domestic influence, the change of the official name of the state language including some structural reforms associated with EU accession [4].

Due to their popularity in the republic the Russian mass media have been a perfect tool for the exertion of the Russian sociocultural influence. Unfortunately, underfinancing and lower quality of the products of Moldovan media outlets led to the situation when they could not compete with the Russian affiliated ones (NTV, PRIME channel, RTR Moldova). The same popularity is observed in the print media – two most popular newspapers Komsomolskaia Pravda v Moldove and Argumenty i fakty v Moldove are local branches of Russian publications. On the internet among social media can be identified Facebook, Odnoklassniki.ru, Telegram, V Kontakte and as internet information platform – mail.ru, sputnik.md, point.md. If we take into consideration how effective and quickly one can change and form different visions today this popularity of foreign media outlets demonstrates how dangerously vulnerable Moldova actually is.

The Moldovan authorities, have repeatedly been trying to minimize the presence of Russian-language content, adopting pieces of legislation that limit the broadcasting of Russian television and

radio on the territory of Moldova. In 2018, a ban on retransmission was imposed in Moldova, information, information-analytical, political and military broadcasts from countries that have not ratified the European Convention on transfrontier Television, which includes Russia [5, p. 191]. Parliament of the Republic of Moldova December 16, 20 repealed this law [6].

Nonetheless on June 22 of this year, the Law on Amendments to the Code on Audiovisual Media Services came into force, prohibiting the broadcasting of Russian news, information and analytical programs and films of military content on the territory of the republic [7]. The exceptions are movies, and entertainment programs that do not contain militaristic content. The law provides for the introduction of strict sanctions for the spread of disinformation.

In December 2022, the license and broadcasting of six channels disseminating incorrect information when covering events in the country and the war in Ukraine were suspended. In 2023 there was announced the creation of the National Centre for Information Defense and Combating Propaganda. On October 24, 2023, the Information and Security Service of the Republic reported blocking access to more than 20 Internet Resources of Russian media. At the same time, we should note that in the republic there are two regions where the media remains under the control of local authorities. Thus, the implementation of the undertaken bans remains in question in the regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia.

Russian sociocultural influence in Transnistrian and Gagauz region of Moldova deserves a special analysis. The regions have been under an exclusive influence of Russia since the moment of determination of their place and status within a newly appeared state - the Republic of Moldova.

In the case of Transnistria “Russian control over leadership and population is limitless having security, political, economic and cultural dimensions”. [8, p. 22] A comprehensive sociocultural influence of Russia is apparently traced in the region. Formally, the educational process in Transnistria should be carried out in three state languages. In fact, from kindergarten to the level of higher educational institutions, the main language of instruction is Russian. Educational programs are largely consistent with the educational policies of the Russian Federation including entire chunks of Russia’s curriculum. “Russian universities have cooperation agreements with Transnistrian ‘State University’ of Tiraspol recognize Transnistrian high school diplomas and provide subsidized places for Transnistrian students. [9]

Historical discourse in Transnistria does not simply reflect internal political interpretations of historical events, it fits into the political evolution in the region, representing a special mixture of symbols and historical justification from the past of Soviet Moldova, obvious anti-Kishinev rhetoric and overt pro-Russian orientation.

It is worth also noting the prevalence of Russian media in the region. Journalists and media outlets are strictly controlled by local security forces. State media and private television channels broadcast the same point of view on all issues. The editorial policy is coordinated in accordance with the information policy of the Russian Federation. At the same time, any initiative or journalist defending the right to freedom of speech is subject to restrictive measures. [10, p. 2.]

It is noteworthy that last years due to the Confidence-Building Measures across the river Nistru funded by the EU, great Russian sociocultural influence has been gradually eroding in the left bank administrative-territorial units. The encouragement of contacts in cultural, social and economic fields, the development of different cooperation platforms has been leading to the rapprochement of the Transnistrian population in values, attitudes, views with the citizens of the rest of Moldova and Europe. Certainly it is early to speak about big changes, at the same time the development of business

contacts and the creation of joint ventures has already formed a distinct segment of business people oriented towards the European perspective and interested in its promotion. According to the data of the Buro of reintegration the share of exports from Transnistria to the EU increased compared to 2019 by 20,58% and amounted to 70, 48% in 2023. In the first three months of this year 80,9% of exports were from EU countries [11].

In Gagauzia the Russian sociocultural influence is rooted in historically forged attitudes towards “protective Russia”. The years of the Russian empire and later the period of the Soviet Union have made the Gagauz identify themselves with the “Russian world”. They see Russia as a country defending them, their interests and their future.

The language which is predominantly used in the region is Russian. Russian culture and Russian media also are very popular. The choice of the Russian language and the cultural belonging to Russia is backed by the education system. The Gagauz study primarily in Russian having limited or no knowledge of Romanian. [12] Comrat University has educational agreements with universities in Russia and with Tiraspol to offer the possibilities to continue studies in this language. [13,] Embassy and other organizations constantly provide literature in the Russian language, quotas for students from Gagauzia, reconstruction and repair of social institutions, acquisition equipment.

A large number of cultural, humanitarian and social projects are being carried out in the autonomy with the support of Russian partner regions. The governments of St. Petersburg and the Moscow region provided specialized equipment, as well as fiction and specialized literature. Every year, since 2015, the best students of Gagauzia attend the alumni festival "Alie Parusa" in St. Petersburg. At the same time, special relations are being built with the Turkic-speaking region of the Russian Federation - the Republic of Tatarstan, which donated musical instruments and equipment. In 2018, Tatarstan also allocated 212 monocomputers and 2000 tonometer [14, p. 59].

The predominant use of the Russian language in the region increases pro-Russian attitudes, since “media consumed comprises mostly rebroadcast Russian programs, as well as locally produced Russian-language TV”. [15]. “73% of respondents who identify as ethnic Gagauz consume media from the Russian Federation” [16]. Media space in Gagauzia is regulated independently from the entire Moldovan space and, as it was mentioned above, the bans limiting the broadcast of Russian content are not valid on the territory of the region. Consequently, it continues to be under the direct influence of Russian narratives and anti-European sentiment is widely spread here. Добавить про нарративы

Political leaders of the region have been constantly under the Russian influence. At present time we can observe a new wave of opposition in relations between the central authorities and the authorities of the autonomy. The elected Başkan Evghenia Guțul has not been recognized by the authorities of Chișinău. The President Maia Sandu is delaying the signing of the decree making her a member of the government, the parliament speaker Igor Grosu called her “a member of criminal gang”. Evghenia Guțul is the former member of the most pro-Russian and for the moment banned as “unconstitutional” party “Șor” she has been insistently developing the relations of the region with Russia transforming it in the eyes of Chișinău government into a “Russian proxy”. Unfortunately, the prediction of some experts that “negative scenarios are very likely” [17] seem to be confirmed in light of the current developments.

The Russian influence in Gagauzia has been enormous it has a significant impact on the formation of Gagauz self-consciousness and self-identification, however it is soundly counterbalanced by the Turkish one. The Gagauz, like the Turks, are a Turkic people and speak

practically the same language. Due to this proximity in language and culture Turkey is building close kin ties with this region exerting a large sociocultural influence despite the difference in worshipped religion. The Gagauz are Orthodox Christians who according to “Seljuc” theory of Turkish scientists are Muslims who merely changed their faith.

Since the early 1990s, Turkey has been actively trying to involve Gagauzia in its cultural space. At that time, it was revived the Turkish project of the 30s of the 20th century or the widespread training of the Gagauz people in Turkish language. With the assistance of Turkey, the Gagauz language was put in Latin script and it largely has financed the study of Gagauz language in schools. Since 1992, students have been studying in Turkey under Demerel’s large student program. Turkish teachers and researchers have regularly come to visit the Comrat University. Turkish language courses have been opened. [18, c. 91]

Besides that, a library named after Atatürk was opened in Comrat and a lot of Turkish literature is regularly sent to the autonomy. The Turkish Cultural Center was established, mosques were opened [19, p. 63]. In 1999, the Moldovan-Turkish Lyceum named after Suleymn Demeril was established in the village of Kongaz. Partner relations are being developed between the schools of Bursa and Chadyr Lunga. [20, p. 280].

Turkey implements a strategy to support socially significant and educational projects on the territory of the Gagauz Autonomy. With the Turkish aid there were built kindergardens, there were repaired schools and cultural centers, including the hospital in Vulcanesti. There were built an emergency center and a creative center for children in Comrat, as well as, the house for the elderly in Chadyr Lunga. Two large-scale infrastructure projects are worth noting: a large sports complex in Comrat with an indoor stadium worth ten million euros which is being built and [21, c. 277] the plan for the construction of an educational complex named after Recep Tayyip Erdogan with the status of the Republican industrial college. Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure of Turkey has approved the construction project of the airport in Gagauzia. [22]

Turkish influence can be seen in the sphere of mass media. Thus, the main Gagauz newspaper “Ana Sezyu” was transferred to Turkish government funding through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA). This agency has assisted the only Gagauz television company “GRT”, providing financial, technical support and internships for employees. [23].

Despite largely developed cultural and economic relations between the Republic of Turkey and the autonomous region, apparently Russian sociocultural influence in this region remains to be bigger. Results of the referendum held in 2014 on the entry of ATU Gagauzia into the Customs Union, showed that the Gagauz people connect their future with Russia. Recent declarations of current political and administrative leaders show that ten years later the situation did not change.

Meanwhile Turkey supports Moldova’s course on European integration, is against the cessation of the region and calls upon the Gagauz people to follow Moldova to Europe and NATO. It was the Turkish Embassy in Moldova that opened the NATO Information Center at Comrat State University in 2015 as well as developed strong bilateral relations with ATU Gagauzia authorities and civil society based on economical, commercial and social-cultural programs and projects of collaboration.

CONCLUSIONS

This study confirms that sociocultural influence constitutes a critical dimension of external engagement in the Republic of Moldova, directly affecting identity formation, political orientations, and societal cohesion. Russian influence, entrenched through historical legacies, language dominance, media control, religious institutions, and education, remains particularly pronounced in Russian speakers regions of Moldova such as ATO Gagauzia and Transnistria. Its systemic and coordinated nature, coupled with a clear geopolitical agenda brings polarizing in domestic politics and continues to challenge state consolidation. As Moldova moves closer to the EU, Russian influence is contested and partly eroding, but still substantial and complicate Moldova's European integration trajectory. In this context Russian sociocultural influence officially is represented not only as societal concern but also a strategic policy challenge of hybrid character requiring sustained institutional and political response in conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian War.

By contrast, Turkey's engagement in Gagauzia follows a distinct and largely complementary pattern. Rooted in linguistic and cultural kinship, Turkish influence is predominantly expressed through educational, cultural, and socioeconomic initiatives, it strengthens a distinct Gagauz identity within Moldova, but plays a much smaller role in national-level identity debates. Importantly, it does not contest Moldova's sovereignty or European orientation and, in several instances, explicitly supports the country's integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures. While Turkish soft power contributes to identity pluralism within the autonomy, it does not seek political realignment and therefore cannot be equated with the Russian model of influence.

From a policy of European integration perspective, promoted by Republic of Moldova, these findings highlight the necessity for Moldova governmental institutions to strengthen national resilience through targeted measures. Priority should be given to social peace promotion based on interethnic tolerance and civic engagement through investing in inclusive education policies that contribute to multilingual competence and civic identity, enhancing media regulation and information security for expanding state presence in regions vulnerable to external narratives. At the same time, constructive external partnerships—such as those with Turkey and the European Union—should be strategically leveraged to support regional development and social cohesion. Managing external sociocultural influence through a differentiated, evidence-based policy approach is essential for safeguarding Moldova's democratic development for European future.

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