

Russia's Moldova Policy

Soft Power at the Service of Realpolitik?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 94

Andrey Makarychev

Nizhny Novgorod Civil Service Academy

March 2010

This memo focuses on the intricacies of Russia's policies towards Moldova in the aftermath of the electoral victory of the Alliance for European Integration (AEI). The defeat of the Communist Party of Moldova in the repeat parliamentary election of 2009 and the resignation of President Vladimir Voronin have deeply challenged Russia's position in this geographically small, yet politically very important, country. It has also made Moscow reshape its policies toward Chisinau.

The main reasons for Russia's policy disorientation in Moldova are to be found in the sphere of identity politics (including perceptions, expectations, and interpretations of foreign relations). Unfortunately, Russia appears to have underestimated the importance of identity to Moldova, involving debates on reunification with Romania and the choice of a European future, as well as a rethinking of relations with Russia. As a result, Russia is unsure how to proceed in its policy toward Moldova, which is now stuck between relatively traditional geopolitical approaches and the application of more sophisticated "soft power" tools.

Russia's Misperceptions

The case of the Russian-Moldovan relationship suggests that a "path dependent" approach which holds that common history predetermines the safekeeping of associative links for the future is too simplistic. Instead, it calls for greater attention to issues of misperception and miscommunication in the bilateral relationship.

First, the Kremlin grossly overestimated the political capital of Moldova's Communists. In the repeat parliamentary election of July 2009, the Communist Party won a plurality of votes but ended up receiving less seats than the four opposition

parties that formed the AEI. This turned what was technically the Communists' victory into a political defeat.

Second, having publicly supported President Voronin, Russia overestimated his pro-Russian potential, ignoring the fact that it was under his leadership that Russia's plan for resolving the Transnistrian conflict was rejected and some people with radical views (such as Yuri Rosca) were given official positions in the government. Economic relations between Moscow and Chisinau were equally cloudy, as illustrated by Russia's ban on the importation of Moldovan wine.

Third, Russia has wrongly ascribed to the AEI anti-Russian intentions, which the Alliance itself painstakingly rejects. Kremlin-supported mass media and public policy organizations in Russia have been keen to divide the Moldovan political and expert scenes into "pro-Russian" and "anti-Russian" segments, despite the highly questionable nature of this division.

The Kremlin and the Communist Party of Moldova: Similarity of Discourses

As an effect of these miscalculations, Russian official discourse has been structured along the same lines as the discourse of Moldovan Communists and, in fact, has imitated its two main points. First, the Kremlin has joined the Communist Party in accusing the AEI of intending to reunify the country with Romania. Russia invokes this rather dubious point to defend the need for a policy of maintaining Moldova's sovereignty. Intentionally focusing on the issue of sovereignty, however, has in a way been self-defeating for Russia, since it only more clearly highlights the political gap between the dominant strategy in Moldova of European integration and the "sovereignty"-centered Russian worldview, predicated upon a much more skeptical attitude to any form of trans- or supra-national integration. In addition, Russia's skepticism about – if not resistance to – the EU-sponsored Eastern Partnership program casts doubt on the supposition that Russia and the EU share common approaches to Europeanization.

The second point common to both Moldovan Communists and the Kremlin is a presumption that only Russian-speaking groups can be considered "genuine" defenders of Russian interests in Moldova and, therefore, to be Russia's interlocutors. This attitude has led to two interrelated effects. The first is a disregard for the prospects of social, cultural, and professional communication with "non-Russian" organizations in Moldova. The second is the promotion of so-called "professional Russians," groups campaigning for closer ties with Russia solely because they view the Kremlin as a source of financial resources to be spent on the support of compatriots living abroad.

The securitization of both the reunification and EU integration perspectives and the focus on forging contacts with "pro-Russian" segments of civil society have limited the gamut of Russian options in Moldova and imbued Russian policy with a great deal of controversy.

Realism and Russian Interests in Moldova

Moscow generally views its relations with Moldova from the vantage point of geopolitical schemes, where the sheer size of Russia predetermines its dominance in the entire post-Soviet territory, or prescriptions grounded in political realism, where the success of Russian policies depends on the strict pursuit of “national interests.” Both perspectives, however, look deficient. Russia’s geopolitical ambitions, based on a shaky foundation of repeated – and mostly unconvincing – references to common historical memories, are not very welcome in Moldova. The re-actualization of the experience of the Soviet Union makes Russian identity conceptually trapped in a Soviet past that is not only rejected by the majority of Eastern and Central European nations but also increasingly less attractive for the European-oriented segments of Moldovan society.

As far as the realist perspective is concerned, the Kremlin has been very slow to fill the hollow notion of “national interest” with specific meanings pertinent to its relations with Moldova. It is usually taken for granted that these interests are well established and understood within Russia’s political community, but this is far from the case. The question of what Russian interests are in Moldova is, in fact, open to debate.

One possible articulation of these interests is the maintenance of Moldova as a sovereign and independent state. In practical terms, this argument implies a need to prevent Moldova from becoming a potential member of the EU. Russian politicians seek to persuade their Moldovan colleagues that the EU is just a junior partner of the United States, which is toning down its political commitments in Eastern Europe and will not lobby for countries like Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova to become EU members. The EU is also frequently portrayed as a “closed club” that lacks sufficient financial resources or ability to assist weak economies. EU membership for countries like Moldova, the logic goes on, means manipulation, submission, loss of identity, provincialization, and new economic challenges (such as increased prices and a need to reorient trade from Russia to the West).

Trying to halt, or at least slow down, Moldova’s European integration, pro-Kremlin politicians frighten their counterparts in Chisinau with the prospect that Moldova will lose its sovereignty by joining Western institutions (the EU and NATO). According to the logic of Russian officials, such misfortune is ruled out in the so-called post-Soviet model of integration. This logic, however, contains a trap, the implications of which stretch far beyond the case of Moldova. The distinction between an EU model of integration, which presupposes the dispersal of sovereignty, and a post-Soviet one intending to safeguard the sovereignties of all parties involved is perceived in Moldova as an indication of Russia’s intent to merely imitate integration and reduce it to a series of state-to-state agreements.

Arguing in support of Moldova’s sovereignty also serves as an instrument for seeking to prevent the country’s unification with Romania. This perspective, however, may still fuel debate within the Russian political community. Some policymakers and experts in Moscow do not deem this scenario detrimental to Russia’s interests, since it could pave the way for the formal separation of Transdnistria from Moldova and legitimize its subsequent absorption by Russia.

Russia claims that another of its interests is fostering Moldova's neutrality, which, more concretely, means blocking its chances for NATO membership. Yet again, declarations alone seem insufficient, since it remains unclear what kind of security arrangements Russia can offer to Moldova in its stead. President Medvedev's proposals regarding a "new security architecture" in Europe neither resonate in countries like Moldova nor are discussed with them.

Russia also declares that it is in its interest to retain the current format of negotiations over Transdniestria. This argument, however, merits deeper debate on the question of what Transdniestria means for Russia: is it a tool for exerting political pressure on Chisinau, a Russian-controlled piece of land at close proximity to NATO and the EU, or a breakaway territory with a perspective of accession to the Russian Federation? Neither the political system of Transdniestria nor its huge debts to Gazprom have been matters of serious debate in Russia so far.

The Hurdles of the Soft Power Approach

These uncertainties have forced the Kremlin to recalibrate its policy instruments in Moldova. To the rather traditional – though not always workable – geopolitical and "realist" approaches it has added more subtle forms of influence grounded in instruments of "soft power." In light of the political changes that took place in Moldova in 2009, Russia has begun to invest more resources in bridging communication gaps with the new pro-Western elites in Chisinau and a variety of nongovernmental groups (mostly think tanks) that support the European reorientation of the country.

One such effort has been undertaken by the Moscow-based "Priznanie" foundation, which initially focused on sponsoring humanitarian projects in Ukraine. In the summer of 2009, the foundation began operating in Moldova, aiming to foster contacts with influential policy- and opinion-makers. In doing so, "Priznanie" has appeared to imitate the kind of Western foundations that intensively operate in foreign countries and are instrumental in influencing local policy agendas and promoting certain policy ideas.

Good intentions, however, do not always come to fruition. Instead of bridging communication gaps between Russia and host countries, the functioning of Russian foundations in places like Moldova and Ukraine sometimes produces polarizing effects within these societies and only complicates the political relationship between Moscow and local capitals. Despite these foundations' self-presentation as "independent civil society institutions," they are overwhelmingly viewed in post-Soviet states as offsprings of the Kremlin.

An even deeper problem is the absence in Russia's foreign policy arsenal of what might be dubbed "normative appeal," which is one of the strongest instruments of the EU's neighborhood policy. This deficit of value-based policies is detrimental to attempts to make use of soft power as a foreign policy tool. The way soft power is understood in the Kremlin does not match the expectations of the new Moldovan elite and just strengthens the perception that Russia is still a *realpolitik* type of power dabbling unsuccessfully and mostly ineffectively with soft power resources. Such soft power "experiments" are doomed unless Russia can offer a long-term concept of post-Soviet integration that is attractive and competitive compared to the EU model. Russia dubs

the Moldovan drive to Europe ideologically-biased, while considering its own policy towards CIS countries as “pragmatic.” Yet alleged Russian pragmatism can easily turn into geopolitical sloganeering, which fails to offer an efficient conceptual framework for tackling the problems that Russia faces in countries located on Europe’s doorstep.

Conclusion

In a more general sense, the case of Moldova raises important questions about Russian attitudes toward Europe. The political success of AEI not only made the portrayal of Europe in Russia less favorable, it unveiled the real scope of Russia’s skepticism toward and lack of trust in the EU. Rather than offer a joint approach with Europe, as was the case in the aftermath of Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, Russia has moved toward making efforts to counterpose the EU project with Russian-led “post-Soviet integration.” At the same time, it is the EU to whom Russia addresses its warnings about the prospects of so-called “Great Romania” incorporating Moldova.

Against the background of two simultaneous trends – Russia’s growing criticism of the prospects of EU enlargement and the EU’s indeterminate policies toward Eastern European states – the need for a political dialogue between Moscow and Brussels becomes more apparent. Instead of focusing upon technicalities, Russia and the EU face the necessity to take more seriously the old idea of “great power management,” and to start thinking more creatively and insistently about bilateral (or, better, multilateral) initiatives in the Baltic-Black Sea area, the Caucasus, and perhaps other regions of what Moscow – still by inertia – dubs “the post-Soviet space.”

This publication was made possible by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.