

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND THE SOFT POWER IN THE BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract: *The strategic communication factor is fundamental for the EU in the decision-making sector, foreign and domestic policy, where public diplomacy and influence on audiences (elites, civilians, masses) is implemented through ensuring effective interaction and communication with civil society, media, non-governmental organizations, stimulating public interest and discussions on topical issues of EU foreign policy with special emphasis on new tools – social media and permanent news streams. External factors such as the bifurcation of world politics, geopolitical confrontation, especially in the Eastern European region, economic problems, along with internal ones, make it necessary to actualize the EU's foreign policy based on soft power in the light of expanding international tensions. The author emphasizes that in a complex multidisciplinary approach to the review and political science analysis of the conceptualization of soft power and manifestation of communication, it is reasonably clear that the realities of modern world politics are marked by a special accent on soft power, strategic communication in terms of liberal discourse. This is manifested, in the case of the Republic of Moldova, by democratization, explicit rotation of elites and electoral processes, economic support, information campaigns, dialogue at the highest level in the process of Europeanisation.*

Strategic communication and the soft power in the bilateral relations of the European Union's and the Republic of Moldova remains one of the most critical aspects in promoting cooperation, partnership, security and mutual interests. The systemic interaction between the institutions and countries of the EU member states and the Republic of Moldova through strategic communication in the bosom of soft power remains one of the most promising and relevant areas in support of European development.

Keywords: *strategic communication, Republic of Moldova, European Union, soft power.*

Introduction

This theme is of particular scientific and practical interest both for the Republic of Moldova and for the European Union. The interdependence of large global actors such as EU, in the security aspects of creating a ring of friendly countries, protection from hybrid and diffuse threats, informational risks, and etc., is largely associated with the success of the EU foreign policy, face of other European states, such as the Republic of Moldova, in the aspects of democratization, modernization, inspiration for internal reforms with external encouragement and conditionality, which are implemented in the EU primarily through a range of non-military measures through the soft power and by the strategic communication.

Although the EU has been instrumental in Moldova's economic, political, and social transformation for decades, this newly bestowed status marks an important step on the long and intensive road to EU membership. Rounds of EU enlargement have been accompanied by increasingly expansive and explicit, even country-specific pre-accession conditions.

The Republic of Moldova is a European state by its cultural, civilizational and historical identity. At the same time, several important steps remain to be taken by the political system and civil society in order to realize the institutional stage of integration with the rest of the European Union member states.

With the EU's support, the Republic of Moldova is entering a new phase of cooperation. The influence of EU soft power and strategic communication extends not only to the ruling elites but also to the broader national interests of Moldova's elites, citizens, and masses. The most significant aspect of this bilateral relationship is Moldova's status as a candidate country for EU membership. This opens the path for future integration into the political, institutional, economic, and socio-cultural systems of the European Union.

Conceptualization of power discourse in foreign policy

During the 20th century different authors have offered various visions of soft power – from the realist understanding to the liberal and transnational paradigms (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Melissen, 2005: 9). Thus, in understanding the peculiarities of EU soft power we proceed from the theory of K. Schmitt, who concludes that the instruments of foreign and internal policy soft and hard power in the terminology of *Potestas directa*, i.e., the direct execution of power. K. Schmitt also distinguished a form of indirect power, *Potestas indirecta*, which was exercised through channels other than the direct international relations vertical of state power (Şmit, 2016). In the context of the analysis of soft power in relations between states, we find it important to cite the conceptualization of soft power in a realist paradigm. Thus, according to H. Morgenthau (Morgenthau, 1976), an approach that involves three dimensions: Political – Hard power; Economic and Cultural (i.e. through the transfer of cultural foundations to create conditions for the export of cultural values in other states through the impact on the population of other states). The classic neoliberal theory of interdependence of soft power J. Nye, who considers that states are only one of the active units along with sectoral (intra-state) structures. It follows from such conditions where the use of military force in the international sphere becomes less and less effective (Keohane & Nye, 1977: 6). In that context, economy in the global world of branding and public diplomacy G. Szondi considers the category of branding of states in close connection with soft power and the concept of public diplomacy (Szondi, 2008), as S. Anhold also identifies fundamental parts in the practical application of public diplomacy as part of soft power: Essence, strategy, symbolic actions, where the practical embodiment of strategy is manifested in tangible actions (Anhold, 2011: 7).

The elements that constitute the strategic communication by soft power basis of public, cultural, scientific, and other types of diplomacy largely derive from communication and dialectical discourse. In systematizing the elements of public diplomacy, turning to the Theory of Communication as a field of knowledge of R. Craig (Craig, 1999) who identifies seven disciplinary approaches to channels of communication applicable to the strategic communications and both the public diplomacy: 1) *rhetorical*, which views communication as the practical art of discourse; 2) *semiotic*, which studies it as a system of signs; 3) *phenomenological*, which studies the ways of organizing communication between people, dialogue; 4) *cybernetic*, for representatives of which communication is a process of processing and transmission of information; 5) *sociopsychological*, in the framework of which communication is interpreted as a way to influence the behavior of a person, groups of people, society as a whole; 6) *sociocultural*, according to which it considers the creation or recreation of social order, the interaction of people in society.

The most important remark of R. Craig for our study will be the correlation between “Rhetorical (good communication must be artful, hence strategic)” and “Phenomenological – Strategic communication is inherently inauthentic & often counterproductive” (Craig, 1999: 134). The combination between the rhetoric and phenomenology often leads to the formation of an anti-rhetorical discourse, where the focus shifts from persuasion and strategic action to dialogue and the willingness to perceive the other. Alternatively, this can lead to hermeneutic rhetoric, where the importance of theory and method in the communication process is significantly reduced. (Craig, 1999: 140).

In this regard, we find it important to cite the definition of the collective of authors Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., van Ruler, et al. “Strategic communication examines organizational communication from an integrated, multidisciplinary perspective by extending ideas and issues grounded in various traditional communications disciplines.” (Hallahan et alii, 2007: 4). A key argument for the topic’s relevance is the role of strategic communications and soft power in the EU’s external relations. The rising flow of information and discourse highlights the need to counter disinformation and hybrid threats. These threats are closely connected to information warfare. They also stem from the expanding use of data and communication technologies in different sectors. Information as an ordered traffic of data - the basis of the narrative of classical diplomacy, dialectical and power discourse of the EU, information and knowledge transfer and technology, as well as the ways of dissemination acquire special significance in the functioning of states and ways of influencing them, as well as pushing them to the desired vector.

Legal and institutional framework of the EU strategic communication

The reforms brought by the Lisbon Treaty affected not only the institutional reorganization, but also the content of the EU communication policy. The Treaty provided for the establishment of the European External Action Service. This opened a new page in the development of EU public diplomacy. In fact, it was then that the term public diplomacy appeared for the first time in the official documents of the European Union when listing the main directions of the EEAS work. Within the new service it was envisaged to create a unit for “strategic communications, public diplomacy and stakeholder engagement.” It was to ensure effective interaction with civil society, mass media and non-governmental organizations, stimulating public interest and discussions on topical issues of the EU foreign policy. For the first time, the focus on new tools – social media and 24-hour news streams – was emphasized. As before, this activity unfolded in two parallel

dimensions - internal and external, with the main task of communicating with the audience outside the EU entrusted to the European Union Special Representatives.” (Iguminov et alii, 2018: 269). European unification follows two main concepts: cooperation and integration. These define how countries in Europe collaborate. Enhanced cooperation has also become an important approach (EC, 2023). Any European state that respects EU treaty values can apply for membership. A strong enlargement policy, built on strict and fair conditions, helps strengthen candidate countries. It ensures that modernization and democratization align with accession requirements. This policy is a key investment in Europe’s security and prosperity. It has already contributed to peace in regions previously affected by conflict. (EEAS, 2016).

The EU’s role as an actor is defined by its unique legal framework. Its institutional structure ensures that EU actions serve the broader European interest, as outlined in its objectives. Unlike other international organizations, the EU holds significant authority, even in areas where states usually retain sovereignty. It has also created an independent legal system, separate from national legal frameworks. EU law applies directly across all Member States, ensuring uniform enforcement. It grants rights and imposes obligations on both states and citizens. Additionally, EU law takes precedence over national law and cannot be overridden in case of conflict. It is important to note that legally and institutionally strategic communication is formalized in the global strategy 2016 where it is noted “The EU is thus an autonomous entity with its own sovereign rights and a legal order independent of the Member States, to which both the Member States themselves and their nationals are subject within the EU’s areas of competence” (EC, 2023).

Mechanisms of the implementation of soft power and strategic communication

The EU soft power and the strategic communications could be clearly seen in the cooperation of the European Union with the countries of the Eastern Partnership is aimed at promoting and helping to strengthen such areas of state acts as the economy, public administration, ecology, and protection of rights and freedoms of all sections of the civilian population.

Thus, the Eastern Partnership is conceived as a mutually beneficial partnership, providing countries with the opportunity to determine the degree of cooperation according to the norms, rules, and standards proposed by the European Union. This approach reflects a consistent change in the very quality of the partnership, thanks to the agreements signed and the introduction of the necessary concessions from the partner countries (Rakhimova et alii, 2023: 23).

The European Union is strengthening its position by enhancing strategic communication, investing in public diplomacy and integrating it into different sectors of activity. EU strategic communication aims to bridge the gap between EU foreign policy and its citizens and to ensure clearer communication with partner states. The EU is focused on providing more consistent and timely messages on its values and initiatives. In addition, providing prompt, fact-based responses to counter misinformation is a priority. The EU will continue to step up efforts to develop an open and inquiring media environment both inside and outside the EU, in cooperation with stakeholders and using social media platforms. (EEAS, 2016).

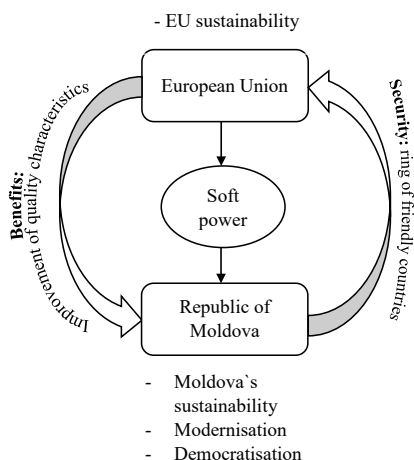


Fig.1. Correlation between EU's soft power impact and security of the Republic of Moldova.

The role of soft power and strategic communication in the evolution of EU-Moldova bilateral relations

In the analysis of strategic communication in the bilateral relations of the RM-EU, it is often identified with related phenomena such as public diplomacy. "Strategic communication" is often used in the framework of public relations, despite the fact that the term also refers to marketing and management (Toledano, 2018). Regarding the EU's soft power policy, the term public diplomacy was first used. Public diplomacy and now the European Union have its own formulations and interpretations of this term. The term civilian power or normative power is more common in documents, as it was invented back in the 1970s. Its essence was that, without military potential, using mainly trade instruments, the integration association can spread, which had formulated in the Declaration of Political Identity (Mămăligă, 2014: 20-29). The most important political feature of the EU soft power is that the EU relies on soft power, i.e., on attraction and persuasion, and not on hard power, such as propaganda or the creation of engaged and corrupt groups (counter-elites and anti-elites). According to the famous diplomacy researcher Jan Melissen, public diplomacy is a key tool of soft power (Melissen, 2005: 5). Power politics and public diplomacy are not entirely separate; they often intersect. While each has its own focus and methods, they frequently overlap and influence each other in achieving broader political and strategic objectives (Melissen, 2005: 78).

Jan Melissen finds it important to note that during the entire manifestation, from the moment of independence of the Republic of Moldova, the European Union provided support through the mechanisms of implementation of soft power, contributed to the gradual and consistent process of democratization of the political system of Moldova. Moldovan professor Mamaliga I., in his work, classifies the progress in relations between Moldova and the EU into 4 stages: 1) 1989-1994 period; 2) 1994-2014 – signing and implementation of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement; 3) signing of the Association Agreement; 4) EU accession process (Mămăligă, 2014: 20-29). In analyzing the Union foreign policy activity, Carp R. in his paper accounts for In his analysis of the Union's foreign policy activities, Carp R. examines the current perspective of key geopolitical actors and their view of the EU. In order to address this issue, the EU has to focus more on its soft power instruments, like multilateralism and the promotion of democracy, rule of law, human

rights, and also climate change, apart from hard power instruments like trade, security and defense, cyber security, and data privacy (Carp, 2020: 107).

The periodization of the development of EU-Moldova bilateral relations in the context of modernization, democratization, Europeanization

After signing the Association Agreement with the European Union in 2014, the Republic of Moldova assumed a number of obligations to carry out reforms and transformations for the deep modernization of the state. Receiving significant financial and technical assistance from the EU, the state authorities managed to initiate the processes of implementing European standards. The Association Agreement serves as a cornerstone in the Moldova-EU relationship, providing a comprehensive legal framework for their dialogue. It sets forth a range of provisions designed to guide the country's reforms, with the successful execution of these measures expected to propel Moldova to a higher level of development and closer integration with the European Union. Modernization and reforms imply qualitative development of political institutions, legal systems and judicial institutions, economic and banking sectors, and the increase of scientific and cultural potential (Stercul, 2018: 35). Importantly, the pro-European majority managed to maintain the foreign policy vector of development. In 2016, the authorities identified the execution of the Association Agreement with the EU as a key priority and accelerated efforts to reform the country. Some of the primary objectives included: strengthening political dialogue and reforms in foreign policy and security; enhancing justice, freedom, and security; and promoting economic collaboration (Stercul, 2018: 35).

During 2017-2019, justice sector reform was one of the constant priorities of the Moldovan authorities, with increasing attention being paid to this objective by the country's leadership, competent authorities, civil society, and development partners. The efforts undertaken aimed at strengthening the independence of the judiciary, fighting corruption in the judicial system, improving the quality of justice, and ultimately restoring public confidence in the justice system. Some relevant elements of justice reform are included as monitored actions in the context of external assistance programmes. As the 2017-2019 NPAA implementation period neared its end, the responsible authorities completed the development of the Strategy for Ensuring the Independence and Integrity of the Justice Sector for 2020-2023, along with the Action Plan to guide its execution. In alignment with the goal of strengthening judicial integrity, the draft law on the evaluation of judges was also formulated. Concurrently, significant efforts were made to draft legislation regarding the operations of the Superior Council of Magistracy, which included proposed constitutional amendments. These initiatives aimed to enhance the transparency and accountability of the judiciary system. The authorities maintained a constant dialogue with the Council of Europe, particularly the Venice Commission, which issued opinions at the request of the Republic of Moldova and continued to examine drafts submitted. Ongoing interaction with the EU was also ensured (RPN, 2020).

According to the official final report of 2020 on the implementation of the Plan of the EU-Moldova Association Agreement for the period 2017-2019, it appears that 71.56% of the objectives proposed for these 3 years have been achieved. In terms of aligning domestic laws with EU acts, the Centre for Harmonization of Legislation reports that, during the same period, 224 out of 420 national acts were successfully harmonized with EU legislation (RPN, 2020: 17).

Subsequently, on the 25 May 2020, the Council provided macro-financial assistance to the Republic of Moldova of EUR 100 million in the form of loans. The purpose of this programme is to overcome external financing difficulties and to fortify the country's foreign exchange reserve, especially the consequences after Covid-19. The assistance has been fully disbursed over the period 2020-2021 (EU, 2020).

In 2022, by achieving candidate status for EU membership, the Republic of Moldova gains substantial advantages: a definitive pathway to EU membership, enhanced judicial fairness, robust governance structures, expanded market opportunities for Moldovan businesses, sustainable growth, greater energy and economic self-sufficiency, and increased appeal to international investors. Furthermore, this status paves the way for financial support to drive reforms in the legal framework, societal structures, and the economy in alignment with EU standards. It also ensures that Moldova's integration reforms remain a primary focus, accelerating its transition toward full EU membership.

Importance of Europeanization and democratization as steps for European integration from candidacy to membership

The process of European integration is based on previously established criteria and conditions under which states joined the EU. This enables any country undergoing European integration to advance based on its own achievements, while also making clear that the EU accession process can be halted if the fundamental requirements are not fulfilled. Having obtained the status of an EU candidate country, Moldova must pass a number of other important milestones on the path to European integration: After obtaining the consent of all 27 members of the European Council, accession negotiations will begin – this phase, based on the Commission's Opinion, Moldova was given a European perspective on 23 June 2022 by unanimous agreement between the leaders of all 27 EU Member States (EC, 2023).

During negotiations, a country must implement EU laws and standards in all 35 negotiation chapters; After the conclusion of negotiations with all 27 EU governments, the European Commission should give an opinion on the degree of readiness of the country to become a member of the EU; Based on this assessment, EU member states must reach a unanimous decision to conclude the negotiations. The European Parliament must then give its approval. Finally, both the EU member states and the candidate country must endorse and approve the Accession Agreement. The country then becomes a member state (MP).

Normative and security dimension of Moldova in the context of EU soft power and strategic communication

Normative persuasion and infiltration as learning mechanisms contribute to the adoption of EU norms for political elites in the Republic of Moldova. Since 2010, it can be observed that most Moldovan political leaders have not questioned the legitimacy of the norm itself, but rather its practical application, particularly as a means of legitimizing their own authority. The introduction of European discourse, or soft power, facilitated the adoption of the norm in both public rhetoric and legislation. Yet, its implementation has been contested. Presently, President Maia Sandu has played a significant role in promoting the EU norm through persuasive efforts, adjusting it to fit the national environment. Despite this, anti-corruption initiatives have faced challenges due to the resistance from dominant political figures. For a norm to become comprehensive, the entire political elite, not just a minority, must accept its behavioral prescriptions (Baltag & Burmester, 2021).

It is crucial to highlight that the EU aims to foster both governmental and societal stability. While promoting stability in democratic contexts may not raise significant concerns, it does challenge the EU's approach to autocratic or semi-authoritarian regimes. In such cases, bolstering governmental stability can inadvertently support the endurance of autocratic systems or highly centralized governments. Within the realm of foreign policy, the EU frequently uses concepts like "security," "human security," "soft security," and "hard security" in a fluid manner. Moreover, by linking "security" with "sustainability," the EU sometimes frames security as a prerequisite for sustainability, other times as a result of it, or even as distinct objectives to be realized. Nevertheless, the direction and type of relationship between security and resilience, and especially the securitization of resilience, is largely marked by the success of democratic transitions, the success of which lies within strategic communication (Kaunert et alii, 2023: 2).

In the case of Moldova, referring to Ryan Kennedy, which assesses EU influence, in Moldova, in the context of the polarization of EU soft power against Russian influence. The strategy of soft power applied in the context of the Transnistrian conflict resolution proved to be insufficiently effective, while the diffuse threats emanating from the Russian Federation in the region affect political processes in the Republic of Moldova and provoke the EU and NATO to look for more effective strategic communication (Kennedy, 2016). In terms of security, the EU will support Member States and enhance its role in Europe's safety and defense capabilities in accordance with the Treaties. The process of gradual alignment emphasizes that: "The EU needs to be strengthened as a security community: European security and defence efforts should enable the EU to act autonomously while also contributing to and undertaking actions in cooperation with NATO". The European Union Global Strategy 21, along with the synchronization of national security planning and capability enhancement procedures, can foster greater strategic cohesion among Member States. Funding from the Union for defence research, technological innovation, and cross-border cooperation, as well as the full utilization of the European Defence Agency's resources, are crucial for strengthening European security and defense operations, supported by a robust European defense sector (EEAS, 2016: 20-21).

Strategic communication and soft power in countering hybrid threats and information risks in the region

The EU's use of soft power has grown in significance, particularly as Russia's aggression toward Ukraine has significantly accelerated the shifts already occurring in the EU's international strategy. Stability, once primarily linked to mitigating the potential risks associated with democratic transitions in Eastern Partnership countries, is now understood in a markedly different context. In analyzing the relationship between geopolitical change and the impact of EU soft power, using the Republic of Moldova as an example, which relies on a conceptual framework consisting of strategic communication via persuasion, enabling, beneficial effects and partnership. Regarding the EU definition of security and resilience, the author comes to an important conclusion, namely: Moldova's domestic circumstances have shaped the EU's approach to strengthening resilience, highlighting the significance of advancing European values and liberal principles. Which in turn are the key factors in increasing Moldova's sustainability and ridding it of corruption and oligarchic interests, and for the EU in empowering and incorporating non-governmental actors (Kennedy, 2014: 2).

It represents the distinct goals of the IPA III framework, which is governed by guidelines and centers on the key priorities of the enlargement process, outlined through

five thematic areas: 1. the rule of law, fundamental freedoms, and democratic principles; 2. effective governance, integration with EU legislation, fostering positive relations with neighboring states, and strategic outreach; 3. environmental sustainability and infrastructure development; 4. economic performance and inclusive growth; and 5. regional and transnational collaboration. Initiatives are carried out for the benefit of stakeholders through yearly or multi-year action plans at either national or regional levels, or through broad initiatives addressing specific partners (e.g. civil society) or overarching issues. Furthermore, several overarching themes, including environmental conservation, community involvement, gender equity, and a people-centered approach, are incorporated (EC, 2023). For a nation to effectively implement its international strategy, it is crucial to consider the factors that influence its overall strength, ensuring that its foreign policy is designed in line with its long-term objectives (NSSRM, 2023).

In this context, it is crucial to reference the Official Concept of National Interests outlined in the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova, adopted on July 15, 2011, by the Parliament's Decision № 153. This document identifies the fundamental national interests of Moldova as safeguarding and defending its independence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty, ensuring the inviolability of state borders, protecting citizens' security, upholding and safeguarding fundamental freedoms and individual rights, and reinforcing democracy. These principles are essential for the advancement of a state governed by legal frameworks and a market-driven economy (NSSRM, 2023).

On the basis of the determinants mentioned in the strategy, the choice of the Republic of Moldova and the bias towards the integration of bilateral relations with the EU is not only timely but also essential for the existence of the sovereign state of the Republic of Moldova: "For a very long time, a series of vulnerabilities were tolerated, which the Russian Federation exploited against the Republic of Moldova: illegal financing of political parties, quasi-monopolies in the economy and on the media market, corruption within the law enforcement and the justice system, limited transport infrastructure, insufficient interconnectivity with the European electric energy market, significant reliance of the agricultural sector on the Russian market, lack of a coherent policy regarding national minorities and ethnic groups, as well as weak public institutions" (NSSRM, 2023).

Conclusion

The Republic of Moldova at the turn of the 21st centuries, under the conditions of building a new world order, faces and remains extremely acute the necessity of adequate response to new challenges ensuring security and its own sovereignty, geopolitical and geo-economic challenges – in connection with the escalation of the international situation, the conflict in the adjacent state Ukraine, fluctuations of the international system. Where the choice of foreign policy vector oriented towards geopolitical *Atlanticism* on the way of joining, accession and integration into the European Union, is marked by the influence of the Union through soft power, which has positive impact: modernization and liberalization of the political system, providing funding to vital sectors of the economy, increasing the transparency of decision-making. That in the period from 2014 to 2024 led to a shift towards a independent foreign policy decision-making mechanisms and ways of their implementation. The essential and crucial feature of the EU influence, realized through the soft power, implemented in various mechanisms (ENP, EaP IPA III, etc.), by increasing stability and sustainable development in the Eastern European region.

The strategic communication factor is fundamental for the EU in the decision-making sector, foreign and domestic policy, where public diplomacy and influence on audiences (elites, civilians, masses) is implemented through ensuring effective interaction and communication with civil society, media, non-governmental organizations, stimulating public interest and discussions on topical issues of EU foreign policy with special emphasis on new tools – social media and permanent news streams. External factors such as the bifurcation of world politics, geopolitical confrontation, especially in the Eastern European region, economic problems, along with internal ones, make it necessary to actualize the EU's foreign policy based on soft power in the light of expanding international tensions. The author emphasizes that in a complex multidisciplinary approach to the review and political science analysis of the conceptualization of soft power and manifestation of communication, it is reasonably clear that the realities of modern world politics are marked by a special accent on soft power, strategic communication in terms of liberal discourse. In connection with the increasing spread of information technologies and the *potestas indirecta* as non-direct influence on political units through appealing to elites and citizens. This is manifested, in the case of the Republic of Moldova, by democratization, explicit rotation of elites and electoral processes, economic support, information campaigns, dialogue at the highest level in the process of Europeanisation.

Strategic communication and the soft power in the bilateral relations of the European Union's and the Republic of Moldova remains one of the most critical aspects in promoting cooperation, partnership, security and mutual interests. The systemic interaction between the institutions and countries of the EU member states and the Republic of Moldova through strategic communication in the bosom of soft power remains one of the most promising and relevant areas in support of European development.

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