

‘TRADITIONAL VALUES’ – A NEGLECTED TOOL OF RUSSIA’S SOFT POWER IN THE EU’S EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

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Abstract: The dispute between ‘traditional’ and ‘progressive’ values, long a feature of internal debate in the West, has recently evolved into a broader civilizational conflict – with the West uncompromisingly advocating progressive values and Russia positioning itself as the champion of traditional ones. This article explores the potential of the Kremlin’s traditional values discourse in the context of the European Union’s Eastern Neighbourhood. It argues that this region is potentially highly susceptible to the Kremlin’s soft power in this respect. While the psychological effect of Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine may temporarily reduce its ability to “attract and co-opt” societies in most Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, the use of values discourse as a channel of soft power is oriented toward the long term perspective and may produce delayed effects.

Keywords: Soft power, traditional values, Russia, EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood.

Introduction

It was in 2017 that participants of Munich Security Conference (or the experts summarizing their discussions) stated that “the world is facing an illiberal moment” (Munich Security Report: 6). The seven years that



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have passed since seem to confirm that grim diagnosis: the return of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, the military coup in Myanmar, autocratic shifts in Tunisia, Kyrgyzstan, and other formerly democratized countries, intensifying repressions in Belarus, full-scale war in Ukraine, and the anti-Western and pro-Russian coup in Niger — all of this testifies to how *illiberal* this moment truly is.

In this article, I am going to look closely at one of the aspects of the ‘illiberal moment’: the axiological cleavage between Western and non-Western countries — and the advantage that Putin’s Russia may derive from it. The dispute between ‘traditional’ and ‘progressive’ (i.e., emancipatory, rational, modern) values — long a feature of internal debate in the West — has recently evolved into a civilizational conflict, with the West uncompromisingly advocating progressive values and Russia claiming the mantle of defender of traditional ones.

In what follows, after a brief literature review, I will explicate the two key concepts of this analysis — *soft power* and *traditional values* (TVL). I then will demonstrate how TVL have become a focal point of ideological and civilizational division, paying particular attention to the Kremlin’s deployment of them as a soft power resource. Finally, I will analyze the potential resonance of the Kremlin’s TVL discourse in the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood, particularly among the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries.

Literature Review

A prominent theme in the literature is Russia’s promotion of traditional values as a counter-narrative to Western liberal ideologies. Robert Horváth (2016) discusses how Russia leverages concepts like family values, religious conservatism, and anti-LGBTQ sentiments to resonate with certain Eastern European societies. A related aspect of analysis is how Russia positions itself as a cultural alternative, appealing to populations disillusioned with the EU’s liberal policies (Solík 2020).

A second key motif involves the strategic dissemination of these values through media and cultural institutions. Dimitrova et al. (2017) highlight Russia’s efforts to emphasize a shared Slavic and Orthodox Christian heritage in the Eastern Partnership countries. By targeting both Russian-speaking minorities and broader societal segments, Russia seeks to cultivate cultural affinity as a means of reinforcing its geopolitical influence.

The intertwining of traditional values with Russia’s broader geopolitical objectives forms a third significant theme. Slobodchikoff and Davis (2017) argue that Russia’s promotion of traditional morality

serves not only cultural aims but also strategic ones, positioning itself against the EU's emphasis on human rights and democratic values. This strategy seeks to counterbalance EU initiatives like the Eastern Partnership, which Russia portrays as threats to traditional societal structures (Chegodar 2023).

A fourth theme revolves around the concept of 'hybrid warfare', in which cultural diplomacy and traditional narratives are employed to undermine Western influence. Darchiashvili and Bakradze (2019) discuss how Russia's soft power strategies overlap with hybrid tactics to consolidate its position in the 'near abroad'. This includes the instrumentalization of traditional values to sow discord and erode the effectiveness of EU policies.

The impact of Russia's traditionalist agenda on political discourse in neighbouring countries constitutes a fifth theme. Keating and Kaczmarek (2019) note that in countries like Slovakia, segments of the population view Russia as a counterbalance to Western liberalism. This indicates that traditional values can generate political alignment with Russia, although this does not always translate into positive perceptions of Russia itself. This suggests a complex interplay between cultural affinity and political alignment that warrants further exploration, particularly within the EaP countries.

Despite the valuable insights provided by existing studies, several critical gaps remain in the literature concerning Russia's use of traditional values as a tool of soft power in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood. Firstly, the concept of 'traditional values' is often treated in a generic manner without sufficient nuance regarding its specific content and the way the Kremlin articulates it. Many scholars reference traditional values in broad terms but often fail to examine in detail what these values entail or how they are constructed and promoted by Russian authorities. This lack of specificity overlooks the Kremlin's deliberate framing of traditional values as a tool to advance its political agenda. For instance, while Horváth (2016) and Solík (2020) acknowledge the promotion of family values and religious conservatism, they do not thoroughly explore how these values are selectively emphasized or reinterpreted by the Kremlin to resonate with targeted audiences in the EaP countries.

Secondly, there is a noticeable absence of a robust analytical framework that situates traditional values within the context of soft power – specifically, how traditional values function as a component of soft power strategies. This gap arises partly because the concept of soft power itself is rarely operationalized. Instead, many studies apply the idea intuitively, relying on the broad and generic definitions provided by Joseph Nye.

Furthermore, the literature has given limited attention to assessing the potential susceptibility of EaP societies to Russia's TVL-based soft power, particularly through the lens of empirical data. While many studies acknowledge that cultural and historical affinities may make some populations more receptive to Russian narratives, few provide a data-driven analysis to evaluate this susceptibility. Consequently, the existing research often falls short of explaining why certain groups within EaP countries may be more influenced by Russia's soft power than others, leaving a gap in understanding the varying levels of receptivity to these cultural appeals.

Explicating Concepts: Soft Power and Traditional Values

Soft power

In his famous book *Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics*, Joseph Nye writes: “[T]here are several ways to affect the behavior of others. You can coerce them with threats; you can induce them with payments; or you can attract and co-opt them to want what you want” (Nye 2004: 2). The latter – “attracting and co-opting” – constitutes the principal feature of soft power (cf. Nye 2004: 5).

Let us notice that ‘attraction’ and ‘co-optation’ are relational concepts, i.e. they presuppose at least three elements: *who* attracts (co-opts), *who* is attracted (co-opted) and *by what* someone is attracted. This reminds of the classical schema of a communicative act, which consists of an Applicant, Recipient, and Channel (cf. Swargiary & Roy 2022: 3). In this article, we are interested in how Russia's political regime attempts at affecting public opinion in other countries, especially in the countries of EaP. Thus, ‘the Kremlin’, ‘Putin's regime’, ‘Putin's Russia’ will be the terms to denote the Applicant of the soft power in question. ‘EU's Eastern Neighbourhood’ or ‘EaP countries’ will denote the Recipient, which can be, depending on the context, understood collectively or distributively.

What can serve as the channel of soft power? Geun Lee distinguishes as many as eight such channels (he calls them “resources”): national slogans, policy proposals, public diplomacies, image of a country, value discourses, national heroes, patriotism, and sports competitions (Lee 2009: 209–210). Of particular interest is the channel of *value discourses* (“spreading theories, concepts, or discourses to other countries so that they adopt specific ways of thinking”) since they are the

subtlest way of attracting/co-opting others. Joseph Nye treats values and culture – along with policies and institutions – as “primary currencies” in applying soft power (Nye 2004: 31). As soft power tools, value discourses are well-suited to “manipulate other countries” way of thinking and preferences” (Lee 2009: 209). They are aimed at the long-term perspective, are difficult to control, and their effectiveness is not always visible at once. It is this resource (channel) of the Kremlin’s soft power that we will be focusing on in this article: how the Kremlin employs traditional values as a channel of soft power, specifically examining its potential to shape public discourse and influence in the EU’s Eastern Partnership countries.

Traditional values

One simple definition of traditional values can be found in the encyclopaedia *Simplicable*, which aims to present concepts in a ‘simple’ and ‘applicable’ manner. According to the entry, traditional values are “the beliefs that people traditionally hold about what is important in life or what constitutes admirable behavior” (Spacey 2023). Since most values concern what is important in life and what constitutes admirable behavior, the *differentia specifica* of traditional values lies in their being “traditionally held” – that is, inherited from previous generations. Under this definition, virtually any value can be considered ‘traditional’ if it has been passed down over time. Indeed, among the “42 traditional values” listed by *Simplicable* are not only family, patriotism, and religious faith, but also justice, cooperation, and tolerance. Because this definition relies on a relatively modest criterion, we will label it as a *weak definition of traditional values*.

In their sociological work *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy*, Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, though do not offer a classical definition, define TVL by enumerating five indicators: importance of God in one’s life, prioritizing obedience and religious faith over independence and determination in educating children, opposing abortion, having strong sense of national pride, and favouring more respect for authority (Inglehart & Welzel 2005: 49). The higher the aggregate value of the above indicators the more traditionalist” the person or society is.

Both ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ definitions of TVL may have further variations, but what is worthy to note here is that in media as well as in some areas of academia there has been tendency to applying a strong definition of TVL, of one or another version. Rarely can we witness a discussion over whether the value X meets the criterion of ‘being traditionally hold’. We usually observe discussions in which it is tacitly

assumed that some values are ‘by nature’ traditional and some other – ‘by nature’ progressive, regardless of how old or new they are.

One characteristic feature of strong definitions of TVL is that they usually come along with evaluative convictions and emotional attitudes. The very expression ‘traditional values’ usually evokes emotionally loaded attitudes: for some they are good and promotable, for others – bad and dangerous. How these values found themselves in a society – inherited from older generation, brought from abroad or invented by way of independent reasoning – hardly plays any role in evoking such attitudes.

The tendency to operating on a strong definition of traditional values and the ubiquity of emotional attitudes attached to them has recently acquired a form of ideological or even civilizational confrontation. “The so called ‘traditional values’ are in reality antithetical to tolerance and human rights” – says a publicist of PEN America (Chichtchenkova 2014). In 2009–2012, there was a heated debate in the UN Human Rights Council over the possibility of a synthesis between human rights and traditional values. The debate revealed a deep cleavage between Western and non-Western countries: the former consistently voted against the proposal to “promote human rights (...) through a better understanding of traditional values of humankind”, while the latter supported it (cf. *Promoting human rights...* 2011). By that time, the very expression ‘traditional values’ had acquired such negative connotations that representatives of Western countries did not even entertain the possibility of reconciling traditional values with human rights. The rejection of traditional values has apparently become a trademark of the West.

Putin’s Russia: From Revolution to Tradition

Vladimir Putin is known for his awe of the Soviet Union, which was epitomized in his 2005 statement that the collapse of the USSR “was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” (NBC 2005). The Soviet Union, however, came to being as a result of Bolshevik revolution, which had not only political but also axiological dimension. The revolution presupposed a radical break with traditional values such as religion, national identity, family, and marriage (cf. Carleton 2005: 3). Some of these values were subsequently restored (e.g. the traditional family) but many remained under formal or informal ban until the late Soviet period (religion, nationalism).

Despite being raised in the atmosphere of ‘revolutionary values’ and his awe to the system that promoted such values, Putin has made

the 'defence of traditional values' part of his domestic and international mission. This image had been hardly noticeable in the early years of his presidency but gained significance after his re-election in 2012. In October 2013, Dmitry Abzalov, president of the pro-Kremlin Centre for Strategic Communications (CSC), presented his report titled *Putin Is the New World Conservative Leader*. This was a clear signal both to Russian and foreign audience that the 'restored Russia' chose to take advantage of the West's rejection of traditional values and try to exploit dissatisfaction that such a rejection unavoidably caused both in Western and non-Western societies. Commenting for media this report, Abzalov said:

Recent trends indicate that there is a demand in the world for a new standard of leadership. [What is demanded] is a person with a rational approach, commitment to family values and consistent keeping his promises. And Vladimir Putin can already be called such a leader (RBC 2013).

In the context of the full-scale war with Ukraine, the Kremlin intensified promotion its image as a (the) defender of 'traditional values'. In his speech at the ceremony of 'admitting four new territories' to Russia on September 30, 2022, Putin picked up the most controversial issues of Western emancipatory discourse and did it in a highly scathing manner: "Do we really want to have here, in our country, in Russia, "Parent No. 1, No. 2, No. 3" instead of "mom" and "dad?" And then, referring to the issue of gender identity: "It is completely unacceptable to inculcate into children the idea that there are other genders besides women and men, and sell them stories about sex reassignment" (TASS 2022a).

Summarizing his story about the 'decay' of Western civilization, Putin went so far as to equate it with 'satanism':

The dictatorship of the Western elites is directed against all societies, including the peoples of the Western countries themselves. This is a challenge to everyone, as this was a complete denial of human, the rejection of faith and traditional values, the suppression of freedom acquires the features of a religion, on the contrary, outright satanism (TASS 2022b).

Less scathingly, but still quite provocatively Putin sounded during his 2024 Annual Address to the Federal Assembly:

We see what is happening in some countries, where they deliberately destroy the norms of morality, the institutions of the family,

push entire peoples to extinction and degeneration, and we choose life. Russia has been and remains a stronghold of traditional values on which human civilization is built. Our choice is shared by the majority of the world's people, including millions of Westerners (PNP 2024).

Putin repeatedly refers to 'world's people', 'millions of Westerners' or 'peoples of the Western countries' who are allegedly dissatisfied with the mainstream axiological turn in the West. Though the scale of this dissatisfaction can be debated, one cannot but admit that it does exist in Western societies, it is not a marginal phenomenon, and it seems to be on the rise (cf. Edenborg 2019). Western experts began to voice their anxiety about the consequences of the polarization over traditional values already in the early 2010s. "Putin outfoxed the West" – wrote Spiegel International authors commenting on the CSC report (Neef & Schepp 2013). Professor Yanni Kotsonis, the head of Jordan Center for Russian Studies at New York University History, deplored the Obama administration's decision to send a low-level, predominantly gay delegation to the Sochi Olympics in December 2013 as this ultimately played into Putin's hands: "The more [Putin] is condemned in the West, the higher his popularity in Russia itself. (...). This is a populist political device that works almost everywhere, and I think Putin understands this very well" (Gutkin 2013).

The Kremlin's value discourse apparently rests on a strong definition of traditional values and conveys a certain emotional evaluation, which, of course, is highly positive, contrary to what is conveyed in the Western discourse in this respect. There are, however, significant differences between what the Kremlin treats as fundamental TVL and what, for example, Inglehart and Welzel imply in their enumeration of indicators of TVL. The pro-life stance (opposing abortions) is for Inglehart and Welzel one of the chief indicators of axiological traditionalism, whereas for Putin it is not what is recommendable for Russian society. "Regarding the ban on abortion, you know, in the modern world, in the vast majority of countries, these decisions are left to the woman herself," said Putin during a press-conference in 2017, implying that it is not a good idea to outlaw abortions (Kremlin 2017). "Women's rights and freedoms must be respected," he said in December 2023 during the broadcast *Results of the Year with Vladimir Putin*, commenting on a postulate to ban or limit abortions (Snegova 2023). As one Catholic publicist wittily noted, "there is not much of a difference between Biden and Putin when it comes to abortion" (Portella 2023).

The conceptual document on "Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values," officially approved by Putin in November 2022, lists among traditional values 'strong family', 'patriotism', 'collectivism' as well as 'human rights and freedoms',

'life' or 'justice' (Ukaz... 2022). But there are no suggestions that pro-life stance is part of this moral canon, nor is there explicitly stated that religious faith is a fundamental value for Russians.

The Potential of Russia's Traditional Values Discourse in the EU Eastern Neighbourhood

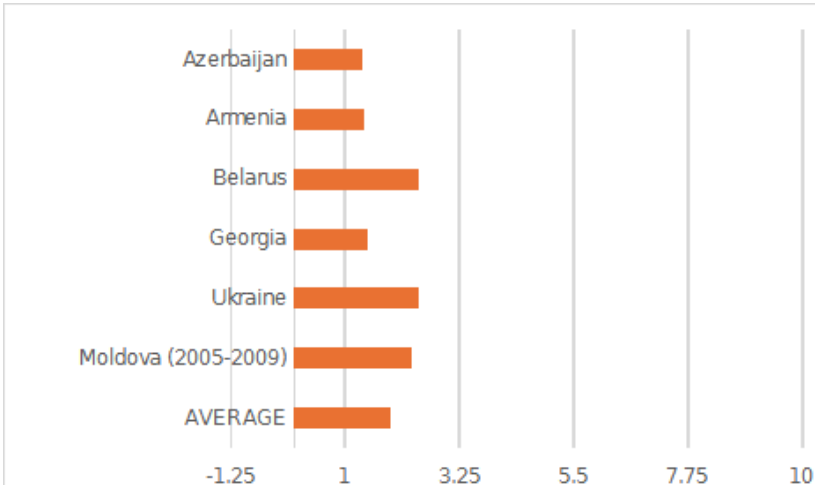
Let us now turn to the post-Soviet space, focusing especially on the axiological preferences of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. This group is considered primarily because it has become a field of competition between Russia and the European Union, with Russia perceiving these countries as its legitimate 'sphere of influence', while the EU aims to establish political and cultural allies within its ambitious project of a 'Wider Europe' (cf. ECFR, About).

To establish the predisposition of EaP's countries to positive response to traditional values discourse we will use the data by World Values Survey (WVS) on how societies of these countries perceive various aspects of LGBTQ+ issues. Although it is not the only theme relevant to the debate over traditional versus progressive values, it has become the primary focus of Russian soft power messaging. Some other issues like attitude to abortion are irrelevant here as the Kremlin's discourse is by no means pro-life. The issue of religion sometimes appears in Russian soft power discourses, but it occurs occasionally and does not constitute a core message. Issues like patriotism or national culture are targeted mainly at internal audience; the Kremlin is not interested in strengthening patriotism and national pride in the neighbouring countries as it might weaken the sense of cultural dependence on Russia.

Let us now look at how the societies of EaP countries responded to three questions on various aspects of LGBTQ+. First aspect was related to the general justifiability of homosexuality. Respondents were asked to assess it on the scale from '1' (never justifiable) to '10' (always justifiable). Since Moldova has not been covered in the last three waves, we will use data from wave 5 (2005–2009); it is unlikely that the situation changed there significantly in the subsequent decade.

As we see, though it is not accompanied with sociopolitical postulates like same-sex marriages, the very idea of justifiability of homosexuality is highly unpopular in the EaP countries. The average acceptance of homosexuality as a phenomenon is at the level of 1.9 out of 10, which means that the vast majority of members of these societies believe that it is *almost never justifiable*. There are no significant

Chart 1. Mean value of justifiability of homosexuality, scale 1–10 (2017–2022, except for Moldova)

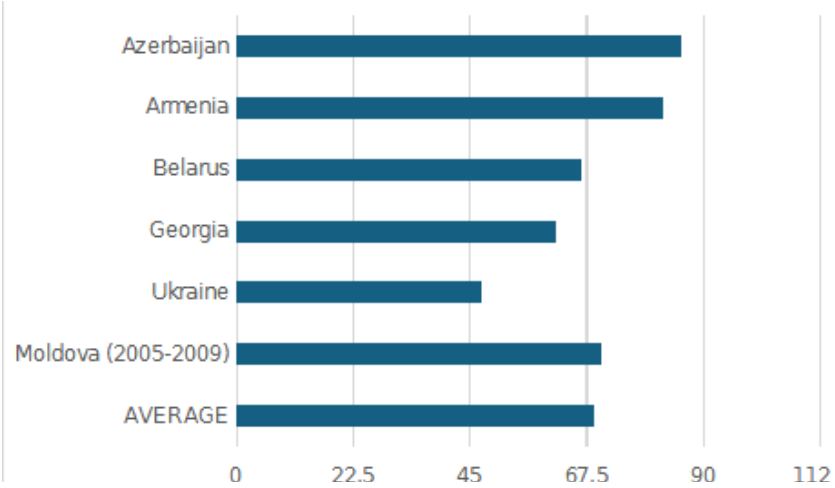


Source: WVS

differences across these societies, with Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova being only slightly more tolerant than the others.

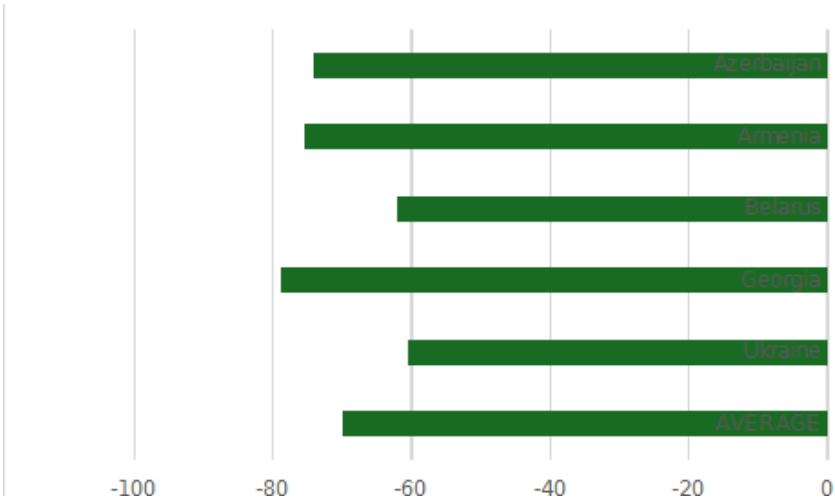
Two other questions drew attention of respondents to situations of likely interaction with homosexuals (having them as neighbours) and the possibility of exposing children to such interaction (attitude to the thesis that ‘homosexual couples are as good parents as other couples’). Let us look at the results (Chart 2 and 3).

Chart 2. % of those who would not like to have homosexuals as neighbours (2017–2022, except for Moldova)



Source: WVS

Chart 3. The index* of disagreement that ‘homosexual couples are as good parents as other couples’ (% , 2017–2022)



Source: WVS

* Note: Index of Disagreement (IoD) was calculated in the following way: $\text{IoD} = (\text{percentage of those who were positive about the statement}) - (\text{percentage of those who were negative about the statement})$.

Thus, there is a high degree of unwillingness to interact with homosexuals and still greater degree of disagreement with the statement that homosexual couples might be good parents. There are remarkable differences between the societies on particular issues: Georgians are relatively open (or less closed) to having homosexuals as neighbours, but they are very radical when it comes to homosexual partnership. Ukrainians are the most open (least closed) both when it comes to gay partnership and living in the neighbourhood with gays. Still, the average value of negative attitude to both situations is very high: 69 % would not like to have gays as neighbours, and the average index of disagreement with the idea of gay parenthood is 70 %.

Summarizing the above data, we should admit that the predisposition of the EaP societies to Russian traditional values discourse is very high. Some additional factors (aggression against Ukraine, qualms about the independence of their country) may reduce the responsiveness to the Kremlin’s messages for the time being, but the very existence of this predisposition creates a constant chance for Russia’s soft power in the EU Eastern Neighbourhood.

One important factor that can weaken or strengthen this chance is how EaP societies perceive the main cultural competitor, the EU, and its role in preserving their own traditional values. To establish this,

we will use data from the survey conducted as part of the project *EU Neighbours East*. Since 2016, eight waves of surveys have been conducted in the EaP countries. After 2020, the survey methodology and question set changed – in particular, the question about traditional values was no longer asked – so we will primarily focus on data from 2017 to 2020. Occasionally, we will consult the latest data; however, it is important to note that in Belarus and Ukraine, data were collected using online tools, whereas in the other countries, surveys were conducted through face-to-face interviews.

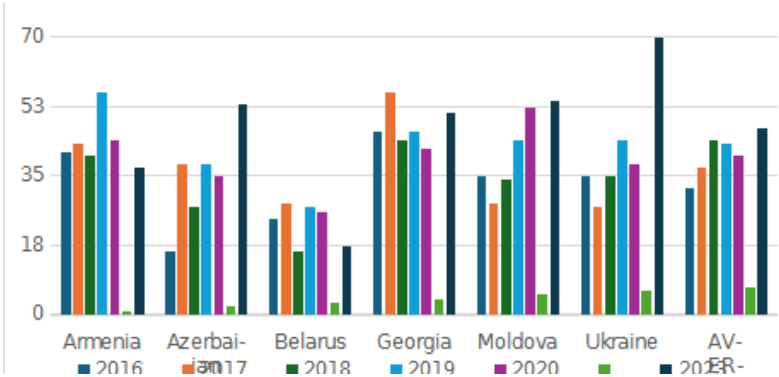
Let us now examine the data on:

- The perception of the EU.
- The perceived role of the EU in preserving the traditional values of each country’s society.

This approach will allow us to understand the attitudes of EaP societies toward the European Union and how they perceive its role in preserving their own traditional values. It will provide a fuller picture of the potential impact of Russia’s traditional values discourse as part of its soft power strategy targeting these societies. The underlying presumption is that, given the two main geopolitical competitors – Russia and the EU (and, by extension, Russia and the West) – the weaknesses of the EU create greater opportunities for Russia, and vice versa.

The image of the EU is generally positive among EaP citizens, but there is a noticeable contrast between Belarus and the rest: in any year of surveys the positive perception of the EU among Belarusians has been significantly lower than the EaP average. Moreover, the EU’s image in Belarusian society appears to be deteriorating, while across the EaP as a whole, it is rather improving (cf. Chart 4).

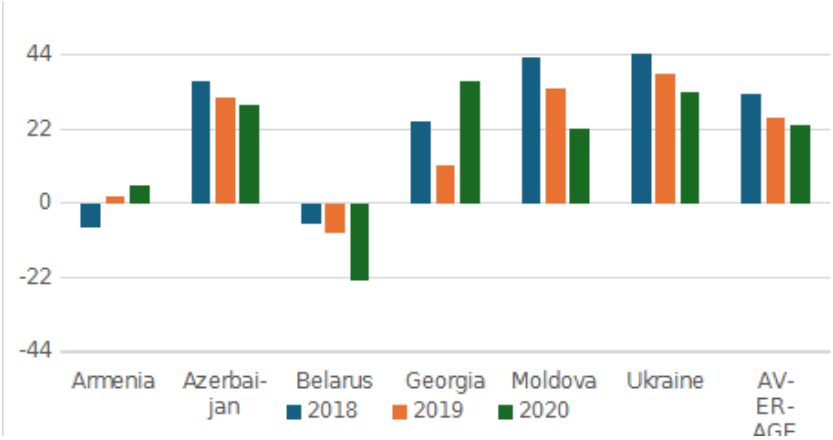
Chart 4. The index* of positive perception of the EU (%)



Source: EaP Neighbours East

The picture differs when it comes to the perception of the European Union's role in preserving traditional values in the EaP countries. Although the average assessment remains positive, it is significantly lower than the general positive perception of the EU. Furthermore, this perception deteriorated for three consecutive years (2018–2020). In two countries – Armenia and Belarus – negative perceptions prevailed over positive ones in 2018; in the following two years, Belarusians grew even more pessimistic, while Armenians, conversely, became more positive.

Chart 5. The index* of perceived role of the EU in the preservation of traditional values in (%)



Source: EU Neighbours East

*Note: Index (IPP) was calculated in the following way:

IPP = (percentage of those positively perceiving the EU) – (percentage of those negatively perceiving the EU).

Those perceiving the EU neutrally were disregarded.

Though the general perception of the EU's role in preserving traditional values in EaP societies is not unfavorable, two signals point to the EU's weakness: the deterioration of the average perception toward the end of the last decade and the consistently negative perception in Belarus, which worsened between 2018 and 2020. We do not have more recent data, but those from the end of the last decade still warrant serious attention. The fact that these data come from a relatively 'peaceful' period makes them even more valuable: emotions related to the war in Ukraine or the post-2020 situation in Belarus did not influence respondents' answers, increasing the likelihood that the results reflect deeper layers of people's convictions.

Conclusion

This article has explored the strategic use of traditional values by the Kremlin as a channel of soft power in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. By positioning itself as the defender of traditional values, Russia seeks to attract and co-opt societies in the EaP countries, leveraging the existing predispositions within these societies. The data from the WVS indicate a strong alignment between the Kremlin's traditional values discourse and the prevailing attitudes in EaP countries toward issues like LGBTQ+ rights. The low acceptance of homosexuality and the high levels of discomfort with homosexuals as neighbours or parents suggest that these societies are potentially receptive to messages that reinforce traditional norms.

The psychological impact of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine has undoubtedly strained its relationships with at least some EaP countries and may have temporarily diminished its soft power appeal. However, values discourse operates on a long-term horizon, and underlying cultural and societal attitudes remain susceptible to influence. The Kremlin's emphasis on traditional values could continue to find resonance, especially if the EU fails to address the concerns of these societies regarding the preservation of their own cultural norms.

The perception of the EU in EaP countries presents both challenges and opportunities. While the general image of the EU is positive, there is a noticeable gap when it comes to its perceived role in preserving traditional values. The deterioration of this perception, particularly in Belarus, signals a vulnerability that Russia can exploit. If the EU is seen as dismissive of traditional values or as a force for cultural change that conflicts with local norms, it risks alienating these societies and ceding soft power influence onto Russia.

The findings suggest that the EU needs to be mindful of the cultural and axiological landscapes of its eastern neighbours. Promoting progressive values without acknowledging and respecting the traditional values held by these societies may inadvertently strengthen Russia's soft power appeal. A more nuanced approach that balances the promotion of human rights with sensitivity to local cultures could mitigate this risk.

In conclusion, the Kremlin's use of traditional values as a soft power tool has significant potential in the EaP countries due to the alignment of these values with societal attitudes. The EU must recognize this dynamic and adjust its strategies accordingly. By engaging with the EaP societies in a way that respects their cultural identities while promoting mutual values, the EU can counteract Russia's influence and support the aspirations of these countries toward greater integration

and cooperation. The long-term impact of values discourse underscores the importance of sustained, culturally sensitive engagement to foster resilience against external soft power influences.

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