



# THE NEED FOR A SOFT POWER STRATEGY FOR ROMANIA. ELEMENTS

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*The importance of soft power strategies in recent decades has been both overstated in some cases, and understated in others. Both approaches have come with negative effects for the initiators, as well as the recipient societies. We can still encounter both approaches in contemporary societies, but we also encounter more moderate and more balanced successful approaches as well. Our assessment is that a balanced, professional, realistic approach and, above all, having as its final goal collective benefits for several states, for an entire region, not only for the initiating state, a soft power strategy that does not conceal hard power goals behind it, would be extremely welcome for Romania, and we propose several elements for it.*

*It would be even more necessary in an area like ours, where different soft power strategies are seen in action, and they have broader strategies concealed behind them, usually characteristic of hard power, with revisionist aims, namely to resuscitate old empires. We can give the example of neo-Ottoman strategies of Recep Erdogan's Turkiye, Vladimir Putin's strategies or Viktor Orban's. In some cases, the hard power strategies disguised in soft forms have been revealed, in others, not yet.*

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## Introduction

This analysis should begin with being realistically aware of the fact that every state, every nation has specific positive cultural, historical or political elements and interests, and highlighting these specific positive elements, in benign interests, that bring nations closer to each other, and do not make them drift apart, can only be an extremely positive aspect in international relations. Even more so in the Romania area.

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Romania urgently needs a soft power strategy that would pursue its regional interests, that would build a positive public image abroad, and that would even contribute to a much needed nation-building dimension, as Romania seems to be still looking for a resolutely assumed regional identity, both politically, and at the societal level. Such a successful strategy would bring economical, political, societal, cultural, and ultimately even security related benefits, dimensions that we will further show, that other countries, such as Poland, are very much aware of. The very endeavour of writing about a soft power strategy for Romania, but also its structuring, must in no way be viewed in connection with the radicalism of certain unscientific exaggerations that deny, deconstruct or minimise the positive attributes of Romanian civilization and culture. Just as they should neither be seen in relation to opposite types of radicalism that fall at the other extreme of a protochronism which is equally false, unrealistic and harmful. As a Romanian researcher with a PhD from the Sorbonne put it, in terms of history, one of the very important elements for developing a soft power strategy: “Romania’s ancient history should not be exploited, nor distorted, but it should neither be ridiculed nor ignored.” (Grigorescu 2022) These words are just as valid regarding other dimensions of a Romanian soft power strategy.

Just the same, such an endeavour must not be ethnocentric in any way, but must be focused on pragmatism, on cultural, political, diplomatic, economic and public image elements. A soft power strategy and its related elements are not emotional matters, these are as pragmatic matters as possible –*what do we have, what can we work with, how can we promote them, what concrete results can they bring us?* This is what it is all about.

Thus, among the elements used in a soft power strategy we can list cultural products, history, sports, political products and manifests of Romania, diplomacy, humanitarian aid, religion (which is more than a cultural product), communication - public diplomacy. The main objective of this analysis is to emphasize the need for a regional and international soft power strategy of Romania, its scope, the significant latent regional potential, the elements on which such a strategy could be founded, and concrete significant benefits of a geopolitical, strategic and economic nature. Romania should definitely improve in all these directions, considering its potential, the strategic positioning and the size of the country.

### ***Hard power and soft power for the national interest***

Regarding the relationship between soft power and hard power, it is worth mentioning that in this analysis we have strictly referred to a soft power strategy for Romania. It is easy to understand that for achieving objectives of strategic interest and security, we cannot speak anywhere in the world about an effective soft power strategy that is not accompanied by a hard power strategy. Especially in the current



context, especially in the region where Romania is located, strengthening lethal hard power capabilities, especially regarding the equipping of the Armed Forces, is essential. This has been emphasized numerous times at the Euro-Atlantic level and is also underscored by current events, especially the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, it is obvious that if certain constituent elements necessary for our soft power strategy or certain objectives of our strategy are not recognised and favourably resolved by other actors in the region, according to international law, human rights, European norms, bilateral or multilateral agreements in force, of course, Romania must also use other more assertive peaceful non-lethal means of persuasion, described by some as “hard power” as well, such as coercive diplomacy (which seems to have been completely forgotten by Romania’s representatives), a much more incisive communication campaign on the given topics, or more convincing economic means, among others. Among these objectives that have not yet been resolved and will probably need hard power instruments as well, here we can mention Romania’s access to certain organisations to which it is entitled to belong, access to certain logistical, economic, and energy infrastructure projects, etc., or the rights of Romanian minorities outside its borders that must mirror the rights of minorities in Romania, or attempts to falsify history and science by foreign entities inventing so-called “Vlach” and “Moldovan” languages. However, obviously, as we have already mentioned, among these hard power instruments that need to be used, there is no question of using threats or armed interventions, but only peaceful means.

However, these hard power means are not the subject of the current analysis regarding the necessity of a soft power strategy. In this analysis, we have already assumed as necessary and anticipatory some actions from Romania in order to achieve specific goals (access to certain organisations such as the Schengen Area, OEEC (Organisation for European Economic Co-operation), minority rights for Romanian citizens abroad, etc.), including through peaceful hard power means, such as coercive diplomacy, if necessary. It must be emphasised that all these examples regarding the need for Romania’s inclusion in certain regional organisations, and observing Romanian/Aromanian minorities’ rights abroad, and other such examples, are not unusual requests or exaggerated unilateral demands from Romania, but rather just certain normal specific issues that are unacceptable if not favourably met in bilateral/multilateral relations almost anywhere else in the world. Yet, Romania’s representatives have inexplicably accepted and allowed unfavourable situations, such as those, persist for decades, to the detriment of pragmatic national interests. Yet, regarding the adequate protection of Romanian minorities’ rights abroad, we must understand that, beyond any ethnocentric approach, a state that does not adequately protect its national minorities and diaspora abroad will never earn the respect of its neighbors. In other words, these are pragmatic issues that have a direct impact on Romania’s status, interests, and security in the region, because no one will respect a state that does not protect its own citizens and minorities beyond its borders.



Thus, in order for the soft power strategy to be successful and not to raise unnecessary and counterproductive suspicions from other regional actors, the two strategies of hard power and soft power must be complementary in Romania's national interest, but they must have specific objectives and separate means. Furthermore, as we have emphasised, Romania's soft power strategy should not only focus on Romania's well-being but also on its contribution to regional security, the resolution of regional conflicts, and building on Romania's image as a protector of the independence and territorial integrity of states in the region. It should be a vision that integrates rather than divides. And this can only be achieved with a peaceful, transparent, yet consistent, determined, and professional hard power strategy, with Armed Forces equipped comparably to what Poland is doing, incorporating the most modern combat techniques, equipment, and tactics (because future warfare will be very different from the current one), coupled with *an honest and separate soft power strategy*. Otherwise, we risk what President Recep Erdogan has been doing in Türkiye, where he started with a neo-Ottoman soft power strategy, first outlined by Ahmet Davutoğlu, a strategy that nonetheless had hidden militaristic and expansionist hard power objectives behind it<sup>1</sup>. For example, one of its essential points that this neo-Ottoman strategy initially had was "zero problems with neighbors", yet in just a few years, Türkiye went from there to threatening Greece and Armenia with military invasions, and to actual military interventions and occupation in Syria and Iraq, as well as espionage directed against the Turkish diaspora (SCF 2017), and cultural institutions like TIKA, YTB, or the Yunus Emre Institute, about which there are multiple testimonies that they are covers for recruitment and activities of the Turkish secret services (Bozkurt 2020), or some Turkish NGOs which have been helping ISIS, al-Qaeda, Hamas, and other terrorist organizations (Kenez 2023) (Dombe 2021). In other words, we are talking about activities, means, and objectives of hard power disguised as activities and entities providing soft power, and these actions lead to regional insecurity and distrust.

Therefore, although both hard power and soft power strategies are essential for pursuing Romania's strategic and defence interests and should be complementary, we

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<sup>1</sup> Even though it is clear that, theoretically, hard power is not usually an end goal in itself but rather a set of tools for achieving objectives, in this analysis, we will refer to "hard power objectives/goals" as those objectives typically associated with the use of hard power instruments, such as militarization, offensive military interventions, economic/political/territorial subjugation of neighboring entities, territorial expansion, or imperialistic visions, etc. The use of soft power instruments to pursue an agenda of hard power objectives is extremely common in our region; we have cited examples such as Russia, Türkiye, and Hungary. Therefore, we encourage the separation of these two strategies in the case of Romania, in order to gain trust and to build a stable and advantageous regional environment for all actors, not just to pursue specific self-interests. In the long term, this separation of objectives and means used may be more advantageous than disguising hard power objectives as soft power for immediate gains, but which leads to the discrediting of the policies of those states, regional distrust, and instability.



must ensure that each agenda acts as stipulated, that there are no hidden hard power objectives behind the soft power strategy, in order not to compromise Romania's image and credibility we want to build in our region. Trust is perhaps one of the most difficult assets to find at the international (and domestic) level at the moment, and Romania must build regional credibility for the good of all. And it cannot do this by disguising revisionist, expansionist, or coercive hard power intentions and strategies under soft power forms, as Russia, Turkiye, or Viktor Orbán's Hungary have been doing. Romania can build regional trust only through the honest pursuit of a hard power strategy when it decides to use one (obviously, non-revisionist), and the honest pursuit of a soft power strategy when it decides to use one. We have to do what we say we are going to do.

### **1. What Does a *Soft Power* Strategy Mean? What Elements Does it Rely on?**

Soft power means much more than what Romania is currently doing. Soft power entails a strategy through which cultural image and economic elements that represent Romania penetrate all layers of the targeted societies, not just at an elitist or declarative level. However, some of these essential topics for Romania's soft power strategy are not currently being treated with the seriousness, professionalism, or objectivity required, but rather with a peripheral dilettantism from a scientific and subjective point of view. Examples of this include ignoring or ridiculing Romania's history in relation to the Daco-Roman civilisation. Nevertheless, strictly from the perspective of international relations, strictly from the perspective of image potential, marketing, and strategy, these topics, themes, and their potential cannot be ignored, let alone ridiculed.

Romania is currently placed more than mediocre in the *Global Soft Power Index* for the year 2024, ranking 58<sup>th</sup> in the world (Brand Finance 2024, 65-6), far behind Poland (ranked 33), behind Hungary, Croatia, Oman, Bahrain, Ukraine, Georgia, or Estonia. The reality is even more dramatic than this ranking suggests because even this position is deceptive and not due to any soft power strategy of Romania or any concentrated effort in this direction by Romanian representatives. It almost certainly owes only to the international recognition of some prominent Romanian sports figures like Nadia Comăneci, Gheorghe Hagi, Ilie Năstase, or David Popovici and the "Dracula" brand, which have made the name "Romania" familiar worldwide. However, scores in education, science, knowledge of Romanian culture internationally, governance, international relations, influence, or communication are extremely weak.

With that being stated, it is imperative to briefly clarify what we understand by soft power. There's no need to review the extensive literature on this subject or its importance and elements. Instead, we will refer to one of the seminal works that



talked about soft power. Joseph Nye Jr. is the one who developed the concept of soft power in the 1990s, and in an emblematic volume from 2004, he stated: “Soft power rests on some shared values. That is why exchanges are often more effective than mere broadcasting. By definition, soft power means getting others to want the same outcomes you want, and that requires understanding how they are hearing your messages, and fine-tuning it accordingly. It is crucial to understand the target audience”. (Nye 2004, 111)

The same author highlights the main categories of sources for exercising soft power: “The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority.)” (Nye 2004, 11) We will further show how, on all three fronts, Romania has significant real potential.

Joseph Nye’s perspective on the concept of soft power has sometimes been criticized for being too “unstrategic” (Patalakh 2016, 87), because it lacks a broader strategic vision and does not adequately consider the soft power strategies of competitors in the region, that it may be more suitable for a liberal approach in international relations rather than a realist approach. Our assessment is that a soft power strategy lends itself to both approaches and depends more on the sources used, the instruments employed, the proper awareness of target societies (including awareness of the soft power strategies of other regional actors, even their potential counteraction), but also on the goals proposed to be achieved, whether a soft power strategy is liberal or realist.

## **2. The Importance of Soft Power Strategies in the Contemporary World. Examples.**

To give two of the most relevant examples of approaches at opposite extremes regarding the use of soft power, which have failed, with negative effects both for the initiators and the target societies, we can mention episodes from the recent history of the United States and China.

For example, as early as 2012, Anna Simons, an American researcher in the field of national security, criticised the fact that American foreign policy had become far too dependent on soft power approaches: “In light of this, tying our long-term security to the notion that we can out-manipulate and out-spin others in the realm of cross-cultural persuasion, and thus wage some sort of soft, smart war seems especially imprudent.” (Simons 2012) Subsequent events have only proven her right, culminating in the devastating failure in Afghanistan. A devastating failure for both the local population and the USA. Despite investing huge sums of money and equipment, despite making extremely welcome progress in terms of human rights



and women's education, for example, the fact that the USA did not complement these with a much more pragmatic policy regarding the selection and promotion of more honest local collaborators, the fact that they relied on corrupt local elements (Azizi 2021), the fact that there was also US corruption (Paton Walsh 2021), these were some of the extremely important reasons why the USA earned such antipathy from the local population, dissatisfied with the rampant level of corruption, and had as allies local leaders who, faced with local Taliban threats, did nothing but accumulate their wealth and flee. In short, here is the failure of overreliance on a soft power strategy, which was poorly implemented on the ground, did not take into account the local specifics, the true needs of the local population, and was subsequently abandoned even by its own hard power elements.

On the other hand, the second example consists of a failure due to underestimating the importance of using a soft power strategy, which comes from the other side, from China. China has invested enormous sums of money in Central Asian states, in Central Asian infrastructure, has concluded agreements with local political leaders, thereby securing its borders against terrorist threats, obtaining significant economic, strategic, geopolitical, and security benefits, and has outlined and built elements of the Belt and Road, an economic and geopolitical initiative almost essential for China. But despite all this, despite the fact that in territorial disputes with Central Asian states it settled for less territory than that in dispute, despite economic investments and vaccine diplomacy, China has lost support and sympathy from the respective societies. We are even witnessing violent attacks against Chinese investors and workers in Kyrgyzstan (Shailoobek 2021), for example, and China is not very well perceived in the region. What is the reason for all this? It is about lack of a soft power strategy to engage with Central Asian societies, and this has been noted at the highest level of academic research in China, by Lu Gang, the director of the Center for Central Asian Studies at East China Pedagogical University. He acknowledges that "(...) China also has strategic disadvantages in Central Asia. One of the most obvious ones is that it does not enjoy a very solid public opinion at the grassroots level of society, and the cultural identities of the two sides are quite different. The reasons are complex. On the one hand, China has long focused on top political leaders and the top management of large enterprises, failing to penetrate the social depth of Central Asia and integrate with ordinary citizens." (Toma and Ghinea 2023). Indeed, the last words seem to accurately describe the same reasons for the failure of the USA in Afghanistan: "focused on top political leaders (...), failing to penetrate the social depth (...) and integrate with ordinary citizens." (Toma and Ghinea 2023)

We have also cited Joseph Nye earlier saying that "It is crucial to understand the target audience." (Nye 2004, 111), so here is explained a very important reason why the USA failed in Afghanistan and, so far, why China has failed to win the sympathy of the societies in Central Asia – they did not understand those societies. This is



why Romania's soft power strategy must be tailored to the audience –it will address the Polish society in one way, perhaps relying on the Vlach culture, on the interwar closeness, on current Euro-Atlantic interests, logistical and strategic commonalities, and in a different way will approach the message for the society in Bulgaria, Greece, Albania, or the United Kingdom.

Seeing these two extreme examples presented, our assessment is that a pragmatic approach, balanced and not strictly driven by instrumental purposes but also aimed at bringing people together, closer, can only be positive and extremely useful for any country, especially for a country like Romania. Especially considering the current absence of such a coherent strategy for Romania, coupled with significant potential and a history devoid of expansionist pretensions that could have created distrust and rejection.

### **3. Different Dimensions of Romania's *Soft Power* Strategy**

A soft power strategy of Romania should be based on two different dimensions, but with many common basic elements, among which cultural products, sports, attitudes, Romania's political products, international relations, Romanian minorities, religion, and communication –public diplomacy. This strategy must encompass elements of nation-building, nation branding, public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and of course, communication, under the umbrella of the goals of a single soft power strategy of Romania to pursue economic, cultural, political, diplomatic, and security related objectives. It may seem surprising that we added nation building to the enumeration above, but today's Romania could use a bit more nation building to help with societal cohesion, to halt massive migration from the country, and to focus citizens' efforts towards a common, beneficial goal. Not to mention the importance of societal cohesion from the perspective of national security. Therefore, in addition to the two different dimensions, one dedicated to close neighborhood, the other dedicated to the global environment, a concentrated soft power strategy of Romania would also have direct beneficial effects on how Romanian citizens perceive themselves, not just on how Romania is perceived externally.

We already have evidence of how nation building and nation branding, for example, intersect today in Ukraine and have significant geopolitical and political importance: “Firstly, nation branding is to a much lesser extent exclusively an activity that is directed to an audience of foreign investors and tourists. The direction toward the international field of politics is much more evident today, compared to what it was before (even if that was also a component in branding campaigns before Russia's attack). Most importantly, it is also directed toward a domestic audience – the citizens of Ukraine. Secondly, and following from that, this means that there may no longer be any sharp distinction between nation building and nation branding – at least not in times of an ongoing armed conflict”. (Bolin și Ståhlberg 2023, 221)





### ***3.1. The dimension focused on close neighbourhood***

Thus, a first dimension of Romania's soft power strategy should focus on the nearby regions, like the Balkans, and Central and Eastern Europe, where we still have Romanian/Aromanian ethnic or cultural minorities, hence a strategy centered on common ethnic/cultural soft power sources, geographical and historical proximity, or certain sources of historical friendship, as well as religious soft power sources. From this perspective of close historical relations or at least without historical tensions, the states with probably the greatest potential are Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Albania, or North Macedonia, not to mention the Republic of Moldova, with which the history and relations are different.

The approach regarding the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will not be thoroughly presented in the current analysis for several reasons, considering the specific and complex nature of their relationship with Romania, but we will briefly point out why a soft power strategy for them would be very useful, as well. Firstly, the Republic of Moldova is a state formed by the Soviet Union through the abusive occupation of Romanian Bessarabia, first carried out by the Russian Tsarist Empire in 1812, through the occupation of a portion of the Principality of Moldavia, inhabited by a definite majority of Romanian ethnics. The Principality of Moldavia, by de jure and de facto means, what remained of it, united with Wallachia in 1859 to form Romania. In the Republic of Moldova, the official language is Romanian, and almost 1.5 million of the country's 2.5 million citizens are also citizens of Romania. However, this specificity in bilateral relations does not mean that Romania should not have a soft power strategy for the Republic of Moldova. On the contrary, the lack of such strategy from Romania has contributed to Moscow maintaining significant influence in the Republic of Moldova, which can lead to increased instability in the entire region at any time. The inaction of Romania's representatives over the past 30 years has left room for Moscow to operate almost freely until recently in the Republic of Moldova. We hope that this war has convinced decision-makers in Bucharest and Chisinau that a new approach is needed in bilateral relations, including the possibility of reunification with Romania.

Secondly, in a similar manner, relations between Ukraine and Romania do experience certain specific and complex issues, largely due to the same legacy of imperialistic conquests and raptures of Romanian Moldavian territories by the Austrian Habsburg Empire and the Russian and Soviet Empires. However, both Ukraine, and Romania need to go beyond these historical challenges and legacies, beyond mutual distrust, and need to properly address each other's concerns (especially regarding Romanian minority rights in Ukraine, such as religious, educational, cultural, language rights, and, respectively, the full support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and lack of any revisionist claims or policies from Romania – there have been no such official claims or policies, but perhaps Ukraine and the



Ukrainian people, especially in this difficult context for them, need to be reassured that there will be none either). This is exactly why a soft power strategy would be very useful to reduce suspicions between people and countries, to build trust and cooperation on the basis of the current internationally recognized territorial and political status of both countries.

### ***3.1.1. Sources of cultural/ethnic soft power. Romanian minorities and “Vlach” cultural elements.***

As we have mentioned at the beginning of this analysis, it must be explicitly stated from the outset that such strategy must not in any way involve or even allude to any form of revisionism, territorial claims, and must not be ethnocentric, but rather focused more on cultural aspects. One such vast cultural heritage is the “Vlach” heritage that exists in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, with numerous associations in Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, the Balkans, assuming a “Vlach” identity. “Vlach” used to be the name given to Romanian/Aromanian people by other nations. *However, in order to draw soft power benefits from this identity and cultural legacy, a parallel strategy (even with hard power instruments, if necessary) of Romania is essential, along with concentrated and vigorous efforts to explicitly embrace and assume the “Vlach” cultural (sometimes ethnic) heritage in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe.* This strategy has been entirely lacking in Romania so far after the 1940s, but the potential benefits of such an endeavour are substantial, whereas its neglect has already caused significant harm to Romanian minorities in nearby states, to cultural heritage, and to Romania’s strategic potential. A case in point is Serbia, where a so-called “Vlach language” has been invented, purportedly different from the Romanian language, with the aim of assimilating Romanian ethnic minorities.

Certainly, where they still exist, Romanian/Aromanian minorities must be decisively supported as well based on the principle of reciprocity according to Romanian norms regarding minorities in Romania, as well as international and European rights. Unfortunately, this is not happening, including because of the lack of involvement by the Romanian authorities.

Specifically, this “Vlach” dimension of soft power should be based on the common elements of Vlach culture ranging from Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia to northern Greece, highlighting the specificity and reputation of this “Vlach” culture throughout this area, with economic and image benefits. Among the attributes of this culture in host countries, we can enumerate mountains and landscapes, forests, a civilization of wood, animal husbandry, tourism, ecology, cheesemaking, and others. For example, remnants of Vlach culture in Czech and partially Slovak Moravia include stereotypes associated with “Vlachs” such as



their sense of and struggle for “freedom” and their rebellious character<sup>2</sup> (Košťálová 2022, (3)), much appreciated throughout the history of their home countries, as well as animal husbandry, cheese production, landscapes, mountains, forests, and Vlachs were (and still are) described as defenders of order and the Christian religion (especially Protestantism), both through their struggle against the Turks and against the Habsburg Empire (Košťálová 2022, 42).

### **3.1.2. Sources of religious soft power. The geopolitics of Orthodoxy**

Regarding the geopolitical and strategic benefits, an essential component of this strategy must also be the so-called *Geopolitics of Orthodoxy*. The essential aid provided by the Romanian Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia to the entire Orthodox Eastern European countries, occupied by the Ottomans for almost 500 years, must be highlighted and used accordingly. For example, it was the consistent aid from the Romanian Principalities which supported and ensured the survival of Mount Athos Orthodox Monasteries, one of the most sacred Christian Orthodox sites in the world, which was occupied by the Ottomans for 500 years. In this regard, there are numerous testimonies<sup>34</sup> (Damaschin 2017, 18), studies<sup>5</sup> (Sullivan 2023, 15) and volumes, such as *Romanian aid to the monasteries of Mount Athos*<sup>6</sup> (Bodogae 2003, 7), and others<sup>7</sup> (Coman 2012, 121).

Whether we are practicing Christians, non-practicing, or not Christians at all, if we are realistic, the importance of Orthodox religion for identity in Romania and for the entire regional space cannot be denied in any way. And if we acknowledge this huge importance, then why not try to cultivate and use it appropriately and strategically?

The Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) is already involuntarily playing a role as a soft power element with real geopolitical benefits for Romania, although,

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<sup>2</sup> “The sense of Wallachian “freedom” and “rebellion” marked intensively Czech and Moravian leaders of the National Revival, struggling for the maintenance of the Czech language and its dialects. (...) this stereotype of Wallachian identity became an iconic image”

<sup>3</sup> “No other Eastern Orthodox people have done as much good for Athos as the Romanians have done”, Porfirie Uspenski (Hristianskyi Vostok, Afon vol. III, p. 334).

<sup>4</sup> “Archimandrite Ephrem, the abbot of Vatopedi Monastery, stated at the University of Bucharest during his visit to Romania in 2000: “We, those from Mount Athos, are indebted to the Romanian Orthodox Church for eternity! We do not forget that Romanian rulers, after the Byzantine emperors, are the founders of most Athonite monasteries.” (Mischevca).”

<sup>5</sup> “In the *post-Byzantine period*, the rulers of the north-Danubian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, through their *monetary gifts* and *donations*, played central roles in the continuation of *religious life* within and beyond the borders of their domains.”

<sup>6</sup> “The unique situation of relatively free rulers that the Romanians had - and therefore with extensive political, diplomatic, cultural, and ecclesiastical powers - what could be called the Romanian hegemony in the Orthodox East.”

<sup>7</sup> “For a period of about 500 years, from the fourteenth until the nineteenth century, the Romanians were the principal sustainers of the Holy Mountain. It was a unique historical and religious phenomenon which has not yet been fully studied and evaluated.”



unfortunately, without consistent political support from the representatives of the Romanian state and without any strategy from them to assist the BOR in its endeavors. In this sense of a very important geopolitical role and soft power element played by the BOR, we can mention the establishment of the Dacia Felix Episcopate in Serbia for the Timoc Romanians (whom Romania's representatives do not defend against intimidation and forced assimilation actions by the Serbian state, which continues to arbitrarily classify them as so-called "Vlachs" who supposedly speak a so-called "Vlach language", and Romanians). Additionally, we can mention the re-establishment of the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia for Romanians in the Republic of Moldova, wrongly placed under the Moscow Patriarchate by the USSR, and we can mention the establishment of the Southern Bessarabia Episcopate. Also, very recently, we can mention a decision of the Romanian Orthodox Church accepting the return of Romanians from Ukraine back under the jurisdiction of the BOR (Ursulean 2024), after they were forcibly placed under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate by the USSR. This illustrates how the Romanian Orthodox Church, acting as a bridge between East and West, plays an extremely important role in terms of soft power influence in our region, reducing the influence of the Moscow Patriarchate and attempting to protect the cultural and ethnic heritage of Romanians in the region. This is a natural course of action, which other states elsewhere in the world have already placed among their top priorities.

And the demand for these soft power actions from the Romanian Orthodox Church is very high even outside Romania today; the Romanian Orthodox Church is being requested from abroad to perform more of these actions, and many people expect the BOR to continue with such initiatives. For example, we have surveys showing that over 60% of Romanians in Ukraine would agree to the opening of Romanian churches in Ukraine by the Romanian Orthodox Church (Gherman 2022, 10) (35% of respondents did not say they would not want this, but chose not to respond to the question – a huge percentage, which suggests fear of answering or attachment to local priests, things that nevertheless did not collide with the desire for the return of the Romanian Orthodox Church to Ukraine. Among those interviewed, only 4% disagreed with the initiative of the Romanian Orthodox Church of opening Romanian churches in Ukraine), and 64% of citizens of the Republic of Moldova would like Patriarch Daniel of the Romanian Orthodox Church to cross the Prut River and visit the Republic of Moldova (Vocea Basarabiei 2024). These are very significant percentages within populations that have been subjected to intensified practices of denationalization and Russification during the USSR era, so they are even more surprising and important to consider in Romania's strategies.

### ***3.1.3. Humanitarian soft power sources. Helping others, philanthropy***

Therefore, the Romanian Orthodox Church and the historical aid provided by the Romanian Principalities to the entire Orthodoxy for centuries fought geopolitically



soft power battles against the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, even though the hard power battles had already been lost by Christians. And this brings us to another element that could be a true pillar of Romania's image and soft power strategy in the region: generosity, mutual assistance, philanthropy as part of Romanian culture, as some researchers also attest. (Sullivan 2023, 42)<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most convincing recent example of this trait was the astonishing mobilization of Romanian civil society in support of Ukrainian refugees at the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. This mobilization of ordinary people, churches, associations, and many volunteers was impressive, noted internationally, and far exceeded the mobilization of representatives of Romanian state institutions. It was the people who helped people, and not a political decision of one kind or another.

Eloquent for this support from ordinary people in Romania, their generosity, is a survey too little or even not highlighted at all in Romania, a survey to which Ukrainian refugees from several European countries responded (FRA 2023). Among all the European countries in the survey, Ukrainian refugees in Romania felt the most helped and best treated across multiple dimensions (for example, only 4% of refugees were denied medical assistance in Romania or treated worse because they were foreigners, the smallest percent of all the countries in the survey, and a much smaller percentage even compared to Poland) (FRA 2023, 55)). And among all the states included in the survey, Ukrainian refugees were the least mistreated in Romania (FRA 2023, 51). Overall, the Ukrainian refugees in Romania were treated much better across multiple dimensions even compared to those refugees in Poland or Germany, which may come as a surprise to many.

If Romania did not capitalize at all politically, strategically, or in terms of external image on this remarkable aid provided to the Ukrainians, Poland, on the other hand, pragmatically used the aid given to Ukraine as a soft power element. Poland, like Romania, was among the first countries to provide aid to Ukraine, and humanitarian aid was extremely substantial from both countries. However, while Poland extensively utilized this aid narratively and morally, explaining and showing the world what it was doing for Ukrainian refugees and Ukraine, Romania witnessed an inexplicable silence, which cannot be excused in any way by "secrecy", as we were told by Romanian decision-makers (of course, we understand that specific security aspects cannot be made public, but here we are talking about a communication campaign at a general level, as all states have done), because absolutely all other states in the world have had a completely different approach and have boasted to the democratic world about what they have done for Ukraine.

The failure to capitalize politically and in terms of image on the aid provided to Ukrainian refugees and Ukraine (logistics, armaments, ammunition, economic

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<sup>8</sup> "it was the people who made the decisions in the end, and their donations speak as much to the breadth of patronage as to the humanity, piety, and ambitions of the donors themselves."



support, etc.) has brought immeasurable damage to Romania's image and international political capital. Even a highly publicized interview with Romania's foreign minister at the time, interview conducted by Stephen Sackur, is an example of the damage done to Romania. The lack of a public communication strategy that could bring huge benefits to Romania's image is impossible to understand, and easy to observe. We have been pointing out this aspect for about a year now. (Blănaru 2023)

Here it is, simply put, from a Polish analyst, how incorporating such elements into a soft power strategy brings benefits to Poland: "Poland's image is an important tool of soft power in international politics, but it also plays an auxiliary role with respect to the hard factors determining the importance of NATO (...) displaying a large amount of solidarity towards Ukraine as well as a decisive, pro-Western approach open to working together with its allies. In the future, this could bring Poland tangible benefits. Above all, it will allow us to play a key role, taking part in decisions on the architecture of the security system in Europe." (Stec 2022) Exactly what Romanian decision-makers refused to understand and implement, both in terms of a soft power strategy and in terms of hard power. For example, Romania found itself in the incredible situation where it no longer produced gunpowder and imported it from Serbia, made with Russian raw materials.

#### ***3.1.4. Sources of political soft power. Romania's image as a supporter and guarantor of the independence of states in the Balkans and Central Europe.***

We have shown above how events and political actions represent an essential resource for a soft power strategy. From this perspective, an essential dimension for developing Romania's image in the region and even for the success of any soft power strategy, especially in our region, with potential substantial geopolitical and strategic benefits, should focus on consolidating trust in Romania as a state that *has no territorial claims against anyone, hence as a non-revisionist state that supports the independence and territorial integrity of all states in the region, one that has never had expansionist attitudes, as a European state, fully integrated into NATO and the EU.* These should be essential pillars of this dimension, essential pillars also for the stability of the Western and Southern Balkans and the entire Central and Eastern Europe, and they are based on multiple actions of Romania and Romanians/Aromanians (Vlachs) over time.

Thus, numerous highly important and valuable historical connections can be made to shape and support Romania's image in the region as a promoter of the independence of various nations, where Romanian/Aromanian "Vlachs" are among the heroes of the struggle for independence, such as in North Macedonia (Pitu Guli, an Aromanian, is a national hero), in Albania (Savu 2023), Greece (Dimaca 2016, 62) (just an example, Evanghelie Zappa, an Aromanian, fought for the independence of Greece and came up with the idea of resuming the ancient Olympic Games)



(Dimaca 2016, 62), even in Hungary or Serbia, Iancu of Hunedoara or Matei Corvin, or in Slovakia or Czechia through the “Vlachs” from Moravia who fought against Habsburg occupation and the Ottoman Empire. Also, Romanians contributed to the future independence of Bulgaria in 1908, Montenegro, and Serbia, through their fight of 1877-1878 against the Ottoman Empire. The Vlachs were the primordial element in the struggles for the independence of Vlachs and Bulgarians from the Byzantine Empire in 1185. It was also the “Vlachs” who initiated the resurgence of the Byzantine Empire after the occupation it suffered following the Fourth Crusade, by defeating and killing in 1205 the Latin Emperor Baldwin I by the Vlach-Bulgarian Empire led by Ioniță Caloian. Romania refused to participate in the partition of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany and Horthy’s Hungary in 1938, Romania also refused to send troops to suppress the Prague Spring Revolution in 1968. Romania was also the one that helped Poland evacuate its army, treasure, and many civilians following its invasion in World War II by Nazi Germany and the USSR. This evacuation of the Polish army through Romania subsequently helped create true legends about the fight of evacuated Polish soldiers in the West, especially against Nazi Germany. These are extremely significant political matters on a regional level, which we have a duty not to let be forgotten and can contribute to creating a positive image of Romania in the sense indicated by us.

Indeed, a multitude of historical and modern elements can be used to construct an image of Romania (as inheritor of the ethnic and cultural “Vlach” element, as well) as a supporter of the independence of all nations in the Balkans and Central Europe in the face of domination by various empires or fascist and communist dictatorships. Although we are aware of some potential obstacles that certain historical events may pose to such a strategic narrative of Romania (especially related to the Southern Dobruja region), we believe that the historical elements presented above are overwhelming and can be decisive for shaping such an approach by Romania. If such a positive image of Romania were to be constructed, historically substantiated, as we see it, it would be extremely valuable, especially in this region we find ourselves in, marked by mutual suspicions of territorial claims among almost all states, and especially in the current geopolitical context, with the ongoing aggression in Ukraine. Such an image would contribute to the regional security climate and would undoubtedly bring various geopolitical, strategic, and even economic advantages to Romania, both in the medium and long term, but even in the short term, if implemented in a concentrated manner.

We can and should demonstrate that the Balkans of Europe are not only Greek, Slavic, or Ottoman, but have also had/ have a common trans-national “Vlach” identity, which can represent a common denominator through the struggle it has led for the independence of Balkan nations for almost a millennium. In other words, by emphasizing the struggle for the freedom of Balkan states by Romanians/Aromanians



within them, we can show that the Balkans do not only mean division, but can also mean unity. And the fact that Vlachs (Romanians/Aromanians) have contributed to the independence of so many states in the Balkans must mean something, perhaps alleviating fears of territorial claims. As mentioned earlier, Vlachs (Romanians/Aromanians) have contributed to the independence of Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, North Macedonia. We need to embrace all these things as part of Romania's identity and use them as soft power, as a common integrating identity of the Balkans, unlike identities that divide. Here there may be room for a kind of motto for a soft power campaign in the region, a soft power campaign that reassures regional states that there is no revisionism or territorial claims behind this campaign: "Vlachs/Romanians have always fought for the independence of the states they were in" or "Vlachs/Romanians have always fought against imperialism."

Such a soft power campaign from Romania can have real chances of success, especially by focusing on this aspect: "Romanians/Vlachs have always fought for the independence of the states they are in". Especially in contrast to Turkish soft power, which rightly raises suspicions of Ottomanism in the region, in contrast to Greek soft power, which raises suspicions of pan-Hellenism, of *Megali Idea*, or even elements of Bulgarian or Serbian soft power, which again raise suspicions among their neighbors. However, Romania can play on this card of being a "historical supporter of state independence" in the South and West Balkans, through the Vlachs who must be part of Romania's identity, which Romania must assume not only in a scientific, academic manner, as it is now, but also in a practical and narrative way, through communication and through different strategies on the ground. Because this will open up countless political, diplomatic, economic, bilateral, and even multilateral cooperation opportunities in the future, these are also the main goals and the definition of soft power, as we have seen.

### ***3.2. The soft power dimension focused on the global environment***

The second dimension of Romania's soft power strategy should have specific elements focused on Romania's overall image in Europe and the world, largely a so-called nation branding, but a bit more, including a dimension of political and strategic interests, not just related to tourism/image/economy/investments.

#### ***3.2.1. Cultural and scientific sources of soft power.***

Alongside cultural products such as classical music, modern sculpture, already well-promoted through events such as the George Enescu Festival or others dedicated to Constantin Brâncuși, this dimension can also include and must include narratives dedicated to a broader spectrum of modern societies, narratives that construct an image of elegance, refinement of Romania, of both antiquity and modernity simultaneously.





Such an image can be developed in our case based on narratives and strategies developed on themes with antiquity, such as that of Dacian gold, for example (including in the narrative, of course, the gold from Romania's Treasury stolen by Moscow), on the imposing statues of Dacians made of red porphyry and marble in museums around the world, on viticulture, beekeeping, cheese-making, ecology, mountains, forests, landscapes, the IT sector, aerospace research, and others. About Dacian gold, one of the world's most renowned experts, Barbara Deppert Lippitz, stated: "In my opinion, you are the only country in Europe that has its history written in its own gold. (...) It is regrettable that you, Romanians, have not capitalized on this history written in gold, as you would have deserved. And when I say 'you would have deserved,' I think of what your history meant for Europe, of the power your gold had in building a civilization worthy of the great civilizations of the world. Here, with you, we do not find gold bought or obtained through conquests, as in other museums around the world. Here we exclusively speak of indigenous gold." (Brilinsky 2007) Indeed, it is striking how a foreign expert pointed out that we haven't capitalized on "a history written in gold". How could we not use "a history written in gold" as an essential element in a soft power strategy? How could we allow the Orăștie Mountains to be vandalized for decades, where many more treasures were lost than the famous Dacian gold bracelets that have been recovered? The main reason as to why we have not yet capitalized on this, is the fact that we have been influenced by very well spread narratives that ridiculed the Dacian legacy of Romania (or, just as bad, exaggerated it), and this prevented us from being objective about it and seeing its pragmatic real potential.

On the same subject, a Romanian-born researcher with a PhD from Sorbonne University, in art history, stated in a remarkable study rewarded by the Romanian Academy that the monumental statues of Dacians in Trajan's Forum did not represent prisoners of war (an atypical aspect in Roman art, as they did not have their hands tied behind their backs), and the fact that some were sculpted out of red porphyry, a "royal" material used only for extremely important persons, demonstrates respect and admiration (Velcescu 2016, 145) for the Dacians in the Roman Empire. The same author goes on by saying: "And the series of the statues of Dacians made of cherry-red porphyry for the porticus porphyretica (the porphyry gallery in the Forum of Trajan) even more confirms the fact that the Dacians were not represented as prisoners. We could say that these monumental sculptures representing Dacians are shown to advantage not only as regards the aspect of the dignified position and attitude of every "barbarian" character, but also as regards the material they were made of: cherry-red porphyry. In the Roman world this material was considered *pietra regale* (see Note 371) and was used for representing the Roman imperial power; the red porphyry was the emperor's monopoly and despite all this the Dacians were sculpted in this material. "Barbarians" were never represented in royal



red porphyry by Roman official art, except for the Geto-Dacians, which is quite an out-of-the-ordinary fact. Without the agreement of Emperor Trajan it would not have been possible for the picture of the Geto-Dacians to be rendered by the Roman official art in this exclusively imperial material” (Velcescu 2016, 94). However, unfortunately, certain recent unscientific creations by some authors have received more publicity, belittling and ridiculing this amazing Dacian heritage of Romania, significantly harming the proper interpretation of Romania’s heritage, its value, and potential, as well as the history itself regarding the Dacian era and beyond. Such attempts at denigration, from authors sometimes rewarded in Budapest, should make us reconsider some of their actions and implications, especially in our regional context.

Returning to the point, what we want to say is that the foundation of the strategy must be argued and built upon antiquity, upon elements of a certain type of prestige and elegance that were defining from an identity standpoint for this space since Roman conquest, being sculpted on Trajan’s Column, in Trajan’s Forum, now being in museums worldwide, coupled with the modernity and importance of research in nuclear physics, IT, aerospace, lasers, for example. The example of some keywords for the potential impact of such a strategy cannot fail to reveal the enormous potential of it: *gold, ancient statues, red porphyry, wine, mountains, forests, ecology, honey, classical music, sculpture, IT, aerospace, nuclear physics, lasers*, the latter keywords bringing all this image of Romania into the modern era through Romania’s huge potential in terms of new technologies.

Such a strategy dedicated to a wide spectrum of the modern international society, along with classical music and modern sculpture, also founded on antiquity, on ancient civilisation, on proven continuity through elements sculpted in stone in one of the most famous monuments in the world and through the presence of the same identity elements today, cannot fail and will be much more elegant, more complex, and more refined than what Romania seems to represent today from the standpoint of the country’s brand worldwide. For example, according to an analysis, ChatGPT purportedly identified “Dracula” as the thing Romania is best known for. (Naturalbornfox 2023) How does this image compare to Czech beer, Alexander the Great, Oktoberfest, the Eiffel Tower, Pope John Paul II, flamenco, or wine, which was purportedly the respective response from ChatGPT regarding other countries?

From an economic standpoint, “Dracula” can bring some relative economic benefits to Romania; through the country brand “Dracula”, one can create amusement parks, for example (either literally or figuratively). However, from the perspective of Romania’s international image, in terms of prestige and geopolitical advantages, a “Dracula” amusement park does not help at all. And in today’s world, the country brand you build must also bring image, political, geopolitical, and strategic benefits, in addition to purely economic ones.



Despite being dramatically underfunded for decades, as we have already mentioned, there is tremendous potential in Romanian research in the field of IT, in physics research, in aerospace, in nuclear, in the Magurele Laser, to name just a few. These areas are extremely relevant, very important, and will become even more crucial in the world of tomorrow. For this future world, Romania must prepare today and build an image and identity anchored in history, in culture, and in modernity. In other words, Romania must build a reservoir of soft power to help it rise to the top, because all of these will mean direct benefits for all Romanian citizens.

### ***3.2.2. Sources of soft power from the diaspora, universities, sports.***

In the same direction, another element is particularly important for building an attractive global reputation and image of Romania: the Romanian diaspora, starting from the descendants of the interwar emigration to the more recent one. A large number of researchers, intellectuals, or professionals of various types from the West originate from Romania. Their expertise, their contribution to host societies, and their image can bring serious benefits to Romania, just like their accumulated experience in their respective fields.

Similarly, a large number of foreign citizens from Eastern Europe, or the Balkans, including Greece and Albania, or from Middle Eastern countries, have studied or are studying at universities in Romania. Therefore, their potential from the perspective of soft power cannot be overlooked. In Joseph Nye Jr.'s seminal work on soft power, Colin Powell is quoted as having said that "I can think of no more valuable asset to our country than the friendship of future world leaders who have been educated here." (Nye 2004, 44), and the author points out that "International students usually return home with a greater appreciation of American values and institutions, and, as expressed in a report by an international education group, "The millions of people who have studied in the United States over the years constitute a remarkable reservoir of goodwill for our country." (Nye 2004, 42) "Many of these former students eventually wind up in positions where they can affect policy outcomes that are important to Americans." (Nye 2004,44-5)

Romania has the advantage of having several legendary figures in certain sports. Together with adequate investments in sports, they have always been and will always be one of the most important methods of promoting a country, making it well-known, appreciated, and loved worldwide. The lack of investment in this direction and the lack of strategy cause significant damage to Romania.

And any international public image, political, or geopolitical benefit automatically means a security and strategic benefit for the country. Poland, Israel, and Hungary all understood this, Ukraine as well, while in our region, Romania seems to be unique in ignoring the pressing need for a country's soft power strategy that addresses both its immediate neighborhood and the international community as a whole.



### ***3.2.3. Sources of political soft power.***

Here, some of the themes that are valid for use in the immediate neighborhood can be reiterated, some of them have already been outlined earlier in the study: Romania as belonging to Western European civilization, membership in the European Union and NATO, humanitarian and military aid provided by Romania to Ukraine, contributions with various peacekeeping troops in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Afghanistan, etc., the absence of territorial claims against neighbors, lack of revisionism, the historical fight of Romanians/Aromanians alongside other Central and Eastern European nations for their independence, Romania's non-participation in the occupation of Czechoslovakia, and others.

## **4. Poland: A Case Study**

On the other hand, unlike Romania, representatives of Poland have been very active in exercising soft power functions and launching regional initiatives with significant soft power elements. Even though their project was rejected by the European Union, we can only mention Poland's initiative to create a Carpathian Macro-Regional Strategy within the European Union. It is difficult to understand how Poland, a country that only holds about 10% of the Carpathian mountain range, could come up with such an initiative, but representatives of Romania, a country that holds approximately 50% of the Carpathian Mountains within its territory, could not propose a similar initiative.

It was also Poland who proposed a European North-South transit route initiative, called the Via Carpatica (Pătrașcu 2024), extremely necessary, and the success of this project is attributed to Poland's soft power, which had both soft power interests behind it as well as concrete pragmatic strategic interests, economic, logistical, and geopolitical. Why could not Romania's representatives conceive such a project? This only goes to show the difference in strategic vision between Poland and the representatives in Bucharest. Such examples could go on, with Romania remaining in the shadow of regional strategies pursued by Austria, Hungary, Poland, Ukraine, Turkey, or Greece. Romania has even lagged behind Russia's regional strategy, as Romania has not been sufficiently involved in the Republic of Moldova, not even as soft power (Simina 2020) (even though the vast majority of the population in the Republic of Moldova is historically Romanian, and we share a considerable number of common values, including the common language). By not doing this, Romania left a lot of room for the Russian Federation's destabilizing geopolitical maneuvers. Today, there are plenty of analyses on this topic, but for 30 years, most of these voices were silent and did not advocate at all for Romania's closer ties with the Republic of Moldova.



But this difference in strategic vision compared to Poland can still be observed if we follow the thread of a soft power strategy. In Poland, even in the *Foreign Policy Strategy of Poland for the years 2017-2021*, we can clearly see emphasized elements of Poland's soft power strategy: "We strive to find pragmatic solutions that are consistent with Poland's *raison d'état*. However, high international status cannot be achieved solely on the basis of a country's military capabilities or economic might. It also stems from "soft power", the intangible dimension of foreign policy which is defined by its attitude towards values, as well as its predictability and consistency in adhering to them. Put together, these factors determine a country's credibility and build its image. At times, such "soft" factors tip the scales by boosting the efficacy of other foreign policy instruments, thereby helping to achieve better results with fewer resources" (Republic of Poland, 20). Indeed, this is probably one of the best and most concise definitions available for what soft power is and what it can achieve.

Continuing, Poland has long realized that "In the modern world, a country's image is no longer a matter of arbitrary opinion – it has become a brand that comes with a measurable value. It can affect a country's ability to achieve its foreign policy goals, as much as it can alter the costs of running a business. Since the Polish brand directly affects our international environment and helps determine our international economic and political standing, helping to build it is a major Polish foreign policy goal" (Republic of Poland, 23). This is the way Poland has realized how important it is to have a strong country brand, and how much it can influence both the domestic economic situation and Poland's international political power, making soft power a major objective of their foreign policy. Representatives of Romania seem not to have cared about these aspects and have often preferred to do almost nothing, often bringing forward ideological pretexts for not doing anything in this regard in a national interest.

In Romania, even though there was an attempt at a so-called "country brand" at some point, it ended up with a logo that faced accusations of being plagiarized (Observator News s.a.), and a non-existent or unimplemented strategy, if it ever existed, beyond this logo. And in *The National Defence Strategy of Romania for 2020-2024*, although there are a few mentions of Romanian culture, heritage, or minorities, they do not show at all the outline of any soft power strategy (as emphasized decisively in the Polish strategy above), nor have they had any concrete repercussions in the actions and attitudes of Romania's representatives, internationally or at home. In other words, they have largely remained just words. This is an unacceptable situation for a country of Romania's size, positioning, and capabilities.

Among the characteristics pursued through Poland's soft power strategy, we can enumerate: supporting Poles outside the borders and protecting Polish cultural



heritage and memorial sites outside Poland, especially in Eastern Europe; valuing and promoting the Polish identity abroad through values derived from their country's history and culture; reconstructing Polish monuments and cultural heritage outside the country; building credibility in foreign policy, including through humanitarian aid and assistance for reconstruction in other states, UN peacekeeping missions; encouraging private economic actors from Poland to engage in reconstruction projects; providing better protection for Polish citizens abroad through more efficient consular services; protecting Polish minorities abroad; implementing a flexible visa policy for other Eastern European states (as seen through the significant number of work permits and visas granted to Ukrainians) (Republic of Poland, 1-25).

In addition to all these, regarding the building of the country's brand, Poland was to focus on: "translating the key messages of Poland's history and culture into a contemporary language that will be understood by audiences across the globe" (Republic of Poland, 23), on promoting and presenting the country as a center with achievements and potential in the field of science, promoting Poland as a modern and innovative country "open for business," presenting Polish contributions to Western civilization and promoting its historical and cultural values, making the study of the Polish language a key branding tool for the country, close cooperation with the Polish diaspora, and activities in international negotiations on climate change (Republic of Poland, 23-5).

Here are some more points in common with our proposals regarding a soft power strategy for Romania: we also propose presenting and promoting Romania as a center and leader in the development of science, especially in the IT sector and software development. We also advocate for the valorization of Romania's historical heritage (beyond "Dracula"), the economic, political, and public image development of the "Vlach" cultural heritage throughout the entire Central-Eastern European and Balkan region, making the Romanian language part of a country brand, highlighting Romania's contributions to European and universal culture and science, focusing on nature conservation and promoting an ecologically friendly country. This includes addressing illegal and excessive deforestation, and wildlife protection, as Romania is home to some of the largest populations of large carnivores in Europe. We also emphasize closer ties with Romanian minorities across borders and the adequate protection of Romania's cultural and memorial heritage within its borders, which currently lacks a clear vision from Romanian representatives (Herlo 2024), and from outside Romania's borders (and not in the way Emanoil Gojdu's extraordinary heritage in Hungary was abandoned by Romanian politicians), but also the protection of Romanian/Aromanian minorities abroad, and policies for granting visas and study grants for them much more extensively than what is currently being done.



## Conclusions

The reasons Romania lacks an integrated strategy or vision for soft power at both regional and global levels are primarily three, and quite simple: deep-seated ideological indoctrination that has severely and negatively impacted Romania's national interests and security (where, for a long time, discussions about national interests, national security, and national identity were suppressed), indifference, and incompetence.

In the current analysis, we addressed the necessity of a soft power strategy for Romania in the region, and on a wider international level. However, we must understand that this soft power strategy does not only mean attracting tourists/investors or creating a positive public image of Romania, but entails much more. There are implications of Romania's soft power strategy for its security, regional status (a state with a high level of regional trust, credibility and respect is clearly one with an increased national security), regional projects or interests (strategic or economic advantages for its own citizens), defence (NATO needs trustworthy and regionally secure states, such as Poland, mentioned earlier as an example, and if Romania brings more benefits to its allies, if it is a more determined regional actor with a positive global public image, then the benefits brought in return by allies to Romania's defence are clearly also more substantial). Furthermore, a successful soft power strategy also brings societal benefits (nation branding and nation building are linked, a positive public image of Romania domestically and internationally can help slow down emigration, increase respect for fellow citizens, culture, and common values, which catalyze a society and make it more resilient to threats, fake news, manipulation), cultural benefits (implicitly, public image, economic, status benefits, also benefits regarding education), political, and geopolitical benefits (Romania must have a much stronger voice in certain regional strategic projects that affect us all), among many others.

Disparate elements of soft power are discernible in Romania's politics and civil society (to give just two examples, what the *La Blouse Roumaine Association* is doing for Romania's public image and culture is remarkable, and what the *Ambulance for Monuments* is doing for Romania's cultural heritage is equally remarkable). However, the lack of a strategy to promote them coherently, adequately, and integratively, to refine and pursue them in the broader interest of Romania, means that some of these elements will be easily ridiculed by some adverse elements or strategies, others will suffer from a lack of human and material capital, others will not have the opportunity to reach their true potential, some will be forgotten (such as Romania's aid to Poland or Romania's refusal to invade Czechoslovakia alongside Nazi Germany, or, later on, alongside the USSR), and others will disappear over time, like Romanian ethnic



and cultural minorities in the Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe. The sum of all these shortcomings and losses will mean that Romania will miss its true potential in the region and in Europe and will miss its regional objectives, as it has done so far (if it had any). All these things will affect Romanian entrepreneurs and Romanian products economically, and all will directly impact Romania's national security and regional importance. Because, in times of crisis, the first to be sacrificed are the entities that are not very important or do not have a say.

Reiterating the initial statements of the current study, these are not sentimental matters; they are as realistic and pragmatic as can be — *what we have, what we can work with, how we can promote them, and what concrete results they can bring us for our own benefits and for the benefit of our entire region, as well.* The way we look at it, this is what a soft power strategy is about, and Romania sorely lacks one and desperately needs it.

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