



Europe by experience: How EU soft power reaches Russia's North Caucasus beyond formal policy

European View
1–9© The Author(s) 2026
DOI: 10.1177/17816858261434329
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv**Evgeny Romanovskiy** 

Faculty of Science, Charles University, Prague, Czechia

Abstract

The EU's influence extends beyond its formal neighbourhood policy through everyday encounters, diaspora networks and procedural experiences. Drawing on 30 interviews conducted in Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia and among North Caucasian diasporas in the EU (2023–4), this article examines how European values travel to Russia's North Caucasus through non-institutional channels. The research reveals that EU soft power operates most effectively through 'procedural Europe': the predictability of bureaucracy, the fairness of legal systems and the transparency of governance experienced through mundane interactions. These findings challenge conventional assessments that measure influence solely through formal programmes. The article argues for recognising procedural coherence as a distinct soft-power asset and supporting informal channels of value transmission. For EU policymakers, this means investing in administrative harmonisation across member states and strategically engaging diaspora networks rather than attempting to establish a direct institutional presence in geopolitically constrained regions.

Keywords

EU soft power, North Caucasus, Europeanisation, Procedural Europe, Diaspora networks, Non-institutional influence, Russia, Transnationalism

Corresponding author:

Evgeny Romanovskiy, Faculty of Science, Charles University, Albertov 6, 128 00 Prague, Czechia.
Email: romanove@natur.cuni.cz



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

Introduction

The idea of writing this study and linking it to a sense of belonging to Europe came up when I came across a series of videos on the YouTube social media platform. In these videos, respondents from Chechnya and Dagestan answered questions about which countries they love and hate. A pattern is visible in the set of short street-interview videos, which focused on the positive and negative attitudes to foreign countries among some residents of Dagestan and Chechnya (gus1thego 2022a; 2022b; 2022c; 2022d). Upon closer examination, these videos revealed a unique and intriguing anthropological perspective. The respondents' frank and often surprising reactions to questions about their preferred and least-liked countries offered a convincing insight into their world-views. The observations made highlight the complexity of the perceptions of Europe and European values in a region that is geographically and culturally far from the EU. For many Chechens, Dagestanis and Ingush, 'Europe' is not a policy framework or an institutional agreement; it is a queue that moves predictably and a legal procedure that treats everyone equally. It is these mundane encounters with European governance, rather than grand political narratives, that shape how the people of Russia's North Caucasus understand and relate to European values. The following observations¹ emerged from fieldwork conducted in 2022–5 across the North Caucasus and among its diaspora communities in the EU. Despite a perception of incompatibility with European values, what Molodikova (2019, 122–4) implicitly frames as an anti-European construct, characterised by Islamic traditions and conservative norms, our research reveals substantial engagement with European ideas through informal channels. North Caucasian diaspora communities, primarily Chechen, are present across EU member states in significant numbers (Koinova 2011, 340), creating transnational networks that transmit experiences of European governance back to their home regions.

The concept of soft power was introduced by Joseph Nye (2004) and adapted to the EU context by scholars such as Ian Manners (2002), often with a focus on institutional mechanisms and policy instruments. However, as Zhurzhenko (2024, 37) argues, 'everyday Europeanisation' unfolds through 'bottom-up processes of cross-cultural border interactions and practices' that operate independently of formal frameworks. This article examines how such processes function in the North Caucasus, a region beyond the reach of EU programmes yet connected to Europe through migration, digital networks and professional exchanges.

The timing of this research proves particularly significant. Russia's war against Ukraine has frozen formal EU–Russia relations while paradoxically intensifying interest in European alternatives among Russia's regions (Wunderlich 2022). Understanding how European values circulate through non-institutional channels becomes essential for assessing the EU's influence in spaces where traditional foreign policy instruments cannot reach.

Soft power underestimated through institutional metrics

Assessments of EU influence typically rely on quantifiable metrics: funding allocated, agreements signed, programmes implemented and institutions established

(Schimmelfennig 2015; Börzel and Risse 2012). The European External Action Service tracks engagement through Association Agreements, visa liberalisation and technical assistance. Yet this institutional focus systematically underestimates the influence flowing through non-state channels.

Consider how a Chechen asylum seeker experiences Europe: not through policy documents but through the consistency of administrative procedures. As one respondent in Vienna explained: ‘In Grozny, rules change depending on who you know. Here, everybody treats everyone the same—rich or poor, Chechen or Austrian. That’s Europe for me.’ This everyday encounter with fair rules shapes perceptions more than any official EU communications campaign could.

The theoretical framework developed by Allen and Smith proves particularly relevant here. They conceptualise Europe as ‘identity, space, and discourse’ (Allen and Smith 1990, 47) rather than merely as a geographical or institutional entity. Scholars have identified cultural, political, economic and value-based dimensions of European belonging (Antonsich 2010). Our research shows North Caucasians engage with all of these, primarily through lived experience rather than formal institutions. This aligns with recent scholarship on ‘everyday Europeanisation’ (Zhurzhenko 2024). Lähdesmäki et al. (2021, 94) demonstrate how European values manifest in daily practices and mundane interactions. In the context of the North Caucasus, this occurs through what might be termed ‘demonstration effects’: when migrants experience predictable governance, their expectations shift and they communicate these altered expectations to communities back home.

Russia as a region of regions

Official EU discourse² often treats Russia as a monolithic entity, yet regional variations prove substantial. The North Caucasus maintains distinct characteristics that shape its relationship with European values differently from those of other Russian regions. As Cornell and Starr (2006) emphasise, the region stands at the intersection of Islamic, Russian and increasingly global influences.

Recent research reveals important intra-regional variations. Dagestan, with its ethnic diversity, what Halbach and Isaeva (2015, 1) call a ‘Berg der Sprachen, (mountain of languages), and relatively pragmatic outlook, demonstrates engagement with Russian and—by extension—European governance models, better managing pluralism compared to the more conservative Chechnya and Ingushetia. Chechnya exhibits ambivalent attitudes, shaped by war trauma (Schaefer 2010) and authoritarian consolidation (Halbach 2012; International Crisis Group 2012). Younger Chechens express interest in European freedoms while fearing that these might undermine social cohesion. As Boehnke et al. (2021) document, the interplay between Islamic values, traumatic memories and authoritarian pressure creates complex negotiations around European ideas. Ingushetia occupies a middle position, with civil society actors actively engaging with European human rights frameworks while maintaining traditional structures.³ These variations suggest that EU soft power resonates differently across the different contexts within Russia, a nuance that monolithic approaches to Russia fail to capture.

A dual register of credibility

For many North Caucasians, especially members of diasporas, Europe is encountered through two distinct registers: EU-level narratives about values and member state practices governing daily life. When these align, European credibility strengthens. When they diverge, cynicism grows. The research identifies consistent patterns in how procedural encounters shape perceptions. Respondents highlighted three key dimensions of what they call ‘procedural Europe’. First, administrative predictability: ‘In Austria, if they say documents take two weeks, it’s two weeks. In Dagestan, it could be two days or two months’. Second, legal fairness: ‘The French labour court treated my case identically to a French citizen’s, I was shocked’. Third, institutional transparency: ‘German university admissions actually follow published criteria, not hidden preferences’.

These experiences align with Lavenex’s (2004) concept of ‘external governance’, the extension of EU rules beyond formal membership. However, in the North Caucasus, this occurs through individual encounters rather than institutional agreements. The accumulation of positive procedural experiences generates what one respondent called ‘trust in the system itself, not just individual people’.

Conversely, when European practice contradicts proclaimed values, soft power erodes. Multiple respondents described disillusionment when encountering discrimination despite equality rhetoric. A Chechen refugee in France observed: ‘They speak beautifully about human rights, but they expel dozens if not hundreds of Chechens, subjecting them to torture in their homeland. So what human rights are we even talking about?’ This credibility gap proves particularly acute around religious freedom, where secular rhetoric often contradicts the practical accommodation many North Caucasians observe in European societies (Heinrich and Lobova 2012).

Everyday Europeanisation and selective uptake

The concept of everyday Europeanisation provides crucial analytical leverage for understanding value transmission beyond institutional channels. Unlike top-down Europeanisation, which is focused on policy convergence (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004), the everyday process is a result of routine interactions and mundane practices.

Our findings reveal hierarchical patterns in value reception. Respondents consistently prioritised three elements of European governance. Legal predictability ranked highest: ‘Knowing that laws won’t change overnight, that courts follow precedent, this security is everything’. Due process followed: ‘Having genuine rights of appeal, transparent procedures, actual recourse against officials’. Workplace safety emerged third: ‘European construction sites where safety rules actually protect workers, not just exist on paper’.

These preferences reflect practical rather than ideological orientations. Respondents valued European practices that reduce everyday uncertainty and arbitrary power. Notably, more abstract democratic values such as political participation or freedom of expression

ranked lower, suggesting that procedural fairness resonates more strongly than political rights in contexts marked by authoritarianism and instability.

Generational differences prove significant. Younger respondents (under 35) demonstrated greater openness to European values, although this manifested as selective adoption rather than wholesale embrace. As one 23-year-old Ingush student explained: 'I take what works from each system—European rule of law, Islamic community solidarity, Caucasian hospitality. Why must I choose only one?' This syncretic approach aligns with theories of 'norm localisation' (Acharya 2004), where external values undergo adaptation to fit local contexts.

Diaspora networks as channels and filters

Diaspora communities serve as the primary transmission channels between Europe and the North Caucasus, though their role proves more complex than simple value transfer. We find, following Koinova's (2011) analysis of diaspora mobilisation, that North Caucasian diaspora networks operate as both bridges and filters. They selectively transmit certain European experiences while filtering others.

Communication patterns reveal sophisticated processes of translation and adaptation. WhatsApp family chats feature detailed discussions of European administrative procedures, often with explicit comparisons to home region practices. Instagram posts showcase not just material prosperity but institutional functionality: photos of good infrastructure, the availability of places for cultural and religious celebration, and migrant children displaying host-country symbols (e.g. national flags, colours or school/sports emblems). Digital platforms amplify these dynamics. For instance, some Chechen diaspora YouTube bloggers regularly attract thousands of views on videos offering practical advice on living and working in the EU.⁴ The channels are explicitly framed as providing EU-focused content aimed at interested audiences and sharing practical mobility-related information. These online channels, along with Telegram discussion groups, act as virtual community forums where European values and their compatibility with North Caucasian traditions are debated and interpreted.

However, diaspora networks also filter European experiences, sometimes reinforcing traditional boundaries. Conservative community leaders may emphasise threats to Islamic values while downplaying governance benefits. Gender dynamics are ambiguous: some networks support women's education and employment; others consolidate patriarchal practices (Szczepanikova 2015; Iliyassov 2021).

Ambivalence and limits

Two structural constraints consistently emerge. First, securitisation and stigma: North Caucasian Muslims face heightened scrutiny in European contexts, shaping their encounters with institutions. The Austrian intelligence services' characterisation of Chechens as 'potential extremist threats' (Expert Council for Integration 2019) creates a barrier to

their full participation, despite their legal residence. This securitisation paradoxically reinforces the appeal of procedural fairness: when achieved despite suspicion, it appears even more valuable.

Second, counter-narratives from Moscow frame European values as civilisational threats. State media portray European societies as morally degraded, while emphasising Russia's role as the defender of traditional values (Tsybulska 2018). Yet our research suggests that these narratives have limited purchase among those with actual European experience. As one return migrant noted: 'They tell us Europe is decadent, but I lived there for five years. Yes, there are problems, but the courts work, officials follow rules. That's not decadence—that's civilisation'.

These constraints neither eliminate the appeal of European practices nor prevent selective adoption. Instead, they encourage strategic engagement, taking what works while maintaining cultural boundaries. This pragmatic approach reflects what Triandafyllidou and Gropas (2022, 3) identify as the multidimensional nature of European engagement, where different aspects resonate differently across contexts. In sum, despite challenges, North Caucasians selectively integrate European practices in ways that conventional foreign policy overlooks—pointing to new avenues for EU engagement.

Policy implications for EU institutions

Support informal channels

While attempting to create new programmes in geopolitically constrained regions, the EU should also map and support existing informal channels. Diaspora networks for professionals that facilitate skills transfer deserve particular attention. Supporting governance-focused civil society organisations has proven more sustainable than political advocacy in authoritarian contexts. Digital accessibility must be protected to ensure European educational and professional resources remain available despite Internet restrictions.

Develop regional differentiation capabilities

The EU should develop analytical frameworks to understand regional variations within authoritarian states. This means commissioning regular perception studies, tracking cultural consumption patterns and monitoring professional standards adoption across the various Russian regions. Communication strategies should reflect regional contexts rather than treating Russia as a monolith.

Address the rhetoric–practice gap

The mismatch between EU principles and member state practices undermines soft power more than any external propaganda. Priority areas for alignment include labour market integration, religious accommodation (e.g. providing halal food options, dedicating

spaces for prayer and adopting school policies that allow religious attire) and anti-discrimination enforcement. When European practice demonstrates that proclaimed values have practical meaning, soft power grows organically. This requires not new declarations but consistent implementation of existing commitments.

Prepare flexible post-conflict frameworks

Russia's war against Ukraine will eventually end, creating opportunities for renewed engagement with Russian regions seeking alternatives. Thus the EU should maintain open channels for educational and professional exchange, even during political tensions. The documentation of governance innovations in Russian regions that align with European standards could facilitate future cooperation. Supporting civil society networks that could serve as bridges when relations improve requires long-term vision that goes beyond the current hostilities.

Conclusion

The case of the North Caucasus reveals how European soft power operates through everyday encounters and procedural experiences rather than formal programmes or political rhetoric. Despite lacking an EU institutional presence, the region engages substantially with European values through diaspora networks, digital channels and professional exchanges. The concept of 'procedural Europe'—the Europe experienced in administrative offices, courtrooms and workplaces—emerges as a powerful but under-recognised vector of value transmission.

These findings challenge conventional assessments, which focus solely on institutional instruments. When North Caucasians experience European governance as fair, predictable and transparent, their value orientations shift more profoundly than could be achieved through strategic communication. Conversely, when European practice contradicts European principles, soft power erodes, regardless of rhetorical sophistication.

For EU policymakers, the implications extend beyond the North Caucasus. In an era of geopolitical competition, understanding and enhancing informal pathways of influence become essential. The EU's soft power ultimately depends not on grand strategies but on millions of mundane interactions where European values are either demonstrated or betrayed. As one respondent summarised: 'Europe isn't Brussels or Strasbourg to me. It's the clerk who treats everyone equally, the court that really protects workers, the university that grades fairly. That's the Europe that changes minds'.

The vantage point should shift from proclamations to procedures, from institutional presence to experiential consistency. For regions beyond EU reach, supporting informal channels while ensuring coherence between rhetoric and practice across member states may prove more effective than any traditional foreign policy instrument. The North Caucasus, seemingly peripheral to EU concerns, thus offers a central insight into how European values travel, transform and take root in unexpected spaces—an insight that European policymakers would do well to heed.

ORCID iD

Evgeny Romanovskiy  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3931-2402>

Notes

1. All interview quotations are anonymised. They come from 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia residing in Russia or who are part of diaspora communities in EU member states (2022–5).
2. For instance, when searching for ‘North Caucasus’ on the official website of the EU in Russia, only news about the persecution of LGBTQ+ activists in Chechnya and other republics of the region is displayed. Older news about the North Caucasus focuses on events from the 1990s and human rights violations in military Chechnya. Additionally, migration statistics and related information regarding Russia categorise people from the North Caucasus as coming from Russia, obscuring regional dynamics. This EU representation of Russia suggests deliberate avoidance of differentiating between the regional identities and socio-political processes in the Russian hinterland, particularly in light of Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine.
3. For example, the large-scale protests in Ingushetia in 2018–19 were exclusively secular in nature and appealed to the power of the law, the Constitution and international norms.
4. For example, LiveEuropaTV. (n.d.).

References

- Acharya, A. (2004). How ideas spread: Whose norms matter? Norm localisation and institutional change in Asian regionalism. *International Organization*, 58(2), 239–75.
- Allen, D., & Smith, M. (1990). Western Europe’s presence in the contemporary international arena. *Review of International Studies*, 16(1), 19–37.
- Antonsich, M. (2010). Searching for belonging: An analytical framework. *Geography Compass*, 4(6), 644–59.
- Boehnke, K., Galyapina, V., Lebedeva, N., & Lepshokova, Z. (2021). Values of ethnic Russians and the indigenous population in North Caucasus republics. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 52(5), 489–506.
- Börzel, T. A., & Risse, T. (2012). From Europeanisation to diffusion: Introduction. *West European Politics*, 35(1), 1–19.
- Cornell, S. E., & Starr, F. (2006). *The Caucasus: A challenge for Europe*. Uppsala: Uppsala University Press.
- Expert Council for Integration. (2019). *Integration report 2019. Integration in Austria – statistics, developments, priorities*. Vienna. https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/dam/jcr:1676f7f4-dc2b-4e93-aef0-f0df633aaf7e/ib2019_en_web.pdf. Accessed 29 January 2026.
- Gus1thego. (2022a). Which country do you hate the most? | Chechen Republic. *YouTube*, 17 September 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvKy3q_FONI. Accessed 28 September 2025.
- Gus1thego. (2022b). Which country do you love the most? | Chechen Republic. *YouTube*, 18 September 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Eam8hi0-rY. Accessed 18 September 2025.
- Gus1thego. (2022c). Which country do you hate the most? | Dagestan. *YouTube*, 5 October 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHwOq78wf4A>. Accessed 6 October 2025.
- Gus1thego. (2022d). Which country do you love the most? | Dagestan. *YouTube*, 7 October 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AXYjTziESA>. Accessed 6 October 2025.
- Halbach, U. (2012). Trennlinien und Schnittstellen zwischen Nord- und Südkaukasus. *SWP-Aktuell* 31/2012. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. Berlin. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/aktuell/2012A31_hlb.pdf. Accessed 29 January 2026.

- Heinrich, H.-G., & Lobova, L. (2012). Religious identity in an open society: The case of Chechen refugees in Austria. In H.-G. Heinrich, L. Lobova & A. Malashenko (eds.), *Will Russia become a Muslim society?* (pp. 243–76). Vienna: Peter Lang.
- Iliyassov, M. (2021). To be or not to be a Chechen? The second generation of Chechens in Europe and their choices of identity. *Frontiers in Sociology*. doi:10.3389/fsoc.2021.631961.
- International Crisis Group. (2012). *The North Caucasus: The challenges of integration (I), ethnicity and conflict*. Europe Report no. 220. Brussels, 19 October. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/russia-internal/220-north-caucasus-challenges-integration-i-ethnicity-and-conflict>. Accessed 29 January 2026.
- Koinova, M. (2011). Diasporas and secessionist conflicts: The mobilisation of the Armenian, Albanian and Chechen diasporas. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 34(2), 333–56.
- Lähdesmäki, T., Kaasik-Krogerus, S., & Mäkinen, K. (2021). *Europe from below: Notions of Europe and the European among participants in EU cultural initiatives*. Leiden: Brill.
- Lavenex, S. (2004). EU external governance in ‘wider Europe’. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 11(4), 680–700.
- LiveEuropaTV. (n. d.). Arslan Europa. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/@LiveEuropaTV>. Accessed 23 January 2026.
- Manners, I. (2002). Normative power Europe: A contradiction in terms? *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2), 235–58.
- Molodikova, I. (2019). Muslim refugees from Russia: Do the Chechens bring their own ‘aul’ from Chechnya to the EU? In K. Górák-Sosnowska, M. Pachocka & J. Misiuna (eds.), *Muslim minorities and the refugee crisis in Europe* (pp. 119–33). Warsaw: SGH Publishing House.
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Schaefer, R. (2010). *The insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus*. Santa Barbara: Praeger.
- Schimmelfennig, F. (2015). Europeanization beyond Europe. *Living Reviews in European Governance*, 10(1), 1–32.
- Schimmelfennig, F., & Sedelmeier, U. (2004). Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 11(4), 661–79.
- Szczepanikova, A. (2015). Chechen women in war and exile: Changing gender roles in the context of violence. *Nationalities Papers*. doi:10.1080/00905992.2014.999315.
- Triandafyllidou, A., & Gropas, R. (2022). *What is Europe?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tsybulska, L. (2018). Image of Europe in Russian media: Journalism or creation of enemy image? *UA: Ukraine Analytica*, 1(11), 19–26.
- Wunderlich, J. U. (2022). European values and EU foreign policy. *Journal of European Integration*, 44(1), 43–58.
- Zhurzhenko, T. (2024). Everyday Europeanisation: Cross-cultural border interactions and practices. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 27(1), 35–52.

Author biography



Evgeny Romanovskiy is a Ph.D. candidate at Charles University, Prague, specialising in transnational migration and European integration. His research examines North Caucasian diasporas and informal channels of value transmission between the EU and post-Soviet spaces.