

Understanding Russia's Soft Power Strategy

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This article examines the specifics of Moscow's soft power strategy. The sources of the Kremlin's interest in the soft power concept are explained. The article discusses how the soft power concept fits in the current Russian foreign policy philosophy. Russia's soft power resources, institutions and instruments are described. Special attention is given to the limitations and constraints of Moscow's soft power strategies. The reasons why these strategies are often being inefficient are explained. The Kremlin's inclination to the combination of the soft and hard power strategies is identified.

Keywords: Russia; soft power; Kremlin; foreign policy

Introduction

It has become commonplace to claim that in the post-Cold War era key international players often prefer to exercise soft rather than hard power. According to those who have adopted the soft power concept, economic, socio-cultural, institutional and legal instruments are more efficient in the present-day world than military strength or direct political and economic pressure. In their view, for many nations, hard power has become an exceptional tool and a last resort in foreign relations rather than day-to-day practice. Hard power is now mainly applicable to those international actors who violate international law or directly threaten national, regional or global security.

Since the mid-2000s, Russia has attempted to develop a soft power concept and an implementation mechanism of its own. The idea of soft power was formally introduced into Russian foreign policy doctrine in 2013 and top Russian leaders (including President Vladimir Putin) have declared that soft power instruments are the most important ones in Moscow's foreign policy arsenal. However, Moscow has repeatedly used hard power instruments in the post-Soviet space over the last decade – most recently in the cases of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014–2015. Such actions are dissonant with Russia's officially proclaimed adherence to non-violent foreign policy methods.

Russia's soft power strategy is a relatively new theme in the academic literature and remains noticeably under-researched. Several categories addressing this topic can be identified. First, some studies, mainly of an historical character, have focused on the alleged continuity of Russia's present-day soft power strategies with Soviet-type propaganda or even Russia's pre-revolutionary foreign policies (Tsygankov, 2013a and 2013b).

Second, there are publications – with more of a policy focus than an academic focus – that simply point out the rise of Russia's soft power strategy and attempt to describe its major features without engaging in deeper analysis (Ćwiek-Karpowicz, 2012; Kosachev, 2012a; Minzarari, 2012; Silayev, 2014).

Third, there are scholars who are interested in the theoretical aspects of Russia's soft power strategy. For example, they examine whether Russian interpretations of the soft power concept correspond to, or deviate from, the original concept designed by Joseph Nye (Lukyanov, 2009; Nye, 2013; Troitski, 2011). Others investigate how the concept fits into Russia's contemporary foreign policy philosophy (Monaghan, 2013; Pilko, 2012; Rusakova, 2010; Simons, 2013). It should be noted that many scholars prefer to study Russia's soft power strategy through the prism of various political communication concepts, including image-making, political branding and public relations (Feklyunina, 2008, 2012a and 2012b; Mäkinen, 2013; Simons, 2013; Taras, 2012). Political communication theories, which are relevant for explaining some aspects of Russian soft power strategies, cannot, however, explain all aspects of this phenomenon.

The fourth strand of the existing literature, and currently the predominant one, includes work that studies specific functional or regional dimensions of Moscow's soft power strategy. For example, a growing number of publications have focused on Russia's soft power policies towards so-called 'compatriots' in the near abroad (Conley et al., 2011; Kudors, 2010), in the Baltic States (Grygas, 2012; Smirnov, 2012) or in the European Union's Eastern Partnership area (Sergunin and Tikhonov, 2013; Tafuro, 2014).

The final group is composed of the relatively few works that seek to provide a complex analysis of the Kremlin's soft power strategy by linking up past and present theoretical and practical aspects of this strategy within the study of specific foreign policy methods, instruments and mechanisms (Dolinsky, 2013; Kudors, 2010; Sherr, 2013; Tafuro, 2014; Taras, 2012). This category of works (Avgerinos, 2009; Osipova, 2012 and 2014) tends to interpret Russian soft power strategy as a type of public diplomacy – an interpretation that is similar to the understanding of other countries' soft power policies. But even this literature is unable to cover all the richness of the subject because some Russian interpretations of soft power go beyond the public diplomacy *problematique*.

Building upon previous research, this article seeks to explain Russia's soft power strategies by examining the peculiarities of the country's contemporary foreign policy thinking and by identifying the drivers of Moscow's political philosophy. More specifically, this article makes an original contribution to the existing research in the way that it interprets Russian elites' understanding of 'soft power' – a concept that has been borrowed from the Western political vocabulary only recently. Moreover, in contrast to the existing literature, which tends to focus on either soft or hard power aspects of Russia's foreign policies, this article argues that the Kremlin's officially proclaimed preference for soft power instruments does not exclude the use of hard power tools: if necessary, and quite often, Russian authorities have tried to combine them. Finally, this article contributes to the academic debate over the Russian soft power strategy by examining the country's soft power resources and institutional mechanisms. This article thus contributes to the literature through a focus not only on governmental agencies, but also on the non-governmental sector actively involved in Russia's soft power activities abroad (albeit not in a very efficient way).

The structure of the article reflects the research agenda above. It starts with an examination of the major causes of the Kremlin's interest in the soft power concept. This is followed by a discussion of how the soft power concept fits within current Russian foreign policy philosophy and how Russian politicians and academics interpret the concept. Subsequently, Russia's soft power resources, institutions and instruments are examined. Finally, the article considers the limitations and constraints of Moscow's soft power strategies, and discusses the reasons why these strategies are often inefficient.

Key sources of Russia's interest in a soft power strategy

Looking retrospectively at the history of the soft power concept in Russia, it became attractive to the country's leadership as early as Vladimir Putin's second presidency in 2004–2008. The concept emerged in the context of the Kremlin's more active policies in the so-called 'near abroad' (i.e. in the post-Soviet space) in particular, as Moscow was seeking to consolidate its power among its perceived compatriots. The 'Russian World' concept that covered Russian speakers living abroad was introduced as part and parcel of the first version of a soft security strategy. The series of 'colour' revolutions in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004 and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 was also conducive to the launch of the Russian soft power debate.

With the help of the soft power concept, the Kremlin aimed to foster economic, political and socio-cultural integration in the post-Soviet space. Its previous policies in the area were mostly elite-oriented. In practical terms, this meant securing local regimes' positions (often) at the expense of Russia's security and economic interests. It appeared, however, that the pro-Russian regimes lost their power in some Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries (e.g. Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine), while their successors often opted for playing an anti-Russian card to consolidate their power. Currently, even in the most stable and traditionally pro-Russian countries such as Kazakhstan and Belarus, popular support for integration with Russia is not sufficiently strong. Thus, by applying soft power techniques Russia hopes to improve its international image and increase its attractiveness to both elites and societies in the CIS countries.

There has also been the need to improve Russia's international image – not only in CIS countries, but also worldwide – which seriously suffered after the 'five-day war' with Georgia in August 2008 and public protests against alleged fraud during the 2011 parliamentary and 2012 presidential elections. The Kremlin launched a massive propaganda campaign to downplay Russia's image of an 'aggressive' and 'undemocratic' country with the aim of making it more attractive to international partners. This goal was viewed as especially important for Moscow's relations with the EU. The latter, on the one hand, was seen as a key international actor as well as Russia's major trade partner and a source of investment and know-how. On the other hand, the EU was Russia's major critic in areas such as human rights, the lack of progress in legal and administrative reforms, and in fighting corruption (Makarychev and Sergunin, 2013). For example, the soft power concept rose in prominence in the Russian political vocabulary during the pre-election debates of 2012, including the so-called 'programmatic' articles by Vladimir Putin (2012a). In these articles, Putin promised to make Russia an attractive and reliable international partner, open to cooperation with foreign countries.

Moreover, there was a need to revisit the foreign policy concept after the 2012 presidential election. As stated in President Putin's decree of 7 May 2012 (issued immediately after his

inauguration), the basic goals of the previous concept had not been achieved (Putin, 2012b). According to Putin, one of the factors that prevented Russia from taking 'solid and respected positions in the international community' – the task which was set in the 2008 Foreign Policy Concept (Medvedev, 2008) – was its negligence of soft power instruments.

The Kremlin acknowledged the fact that Russia was lagging behind other major international actors who had already developed and begun to implement their soft power doctrines. According to Konstantin Kosachev (ex-director of *Rossotrudnichestvo*, the Russian governmental agency responsible for relations with the CIS and compatriots living abroad), Russia has preserved its hard power parity with other key international players but it is lagging behind them in terms of soft power (Kosachev, 2012b). As explained in the 2013 Russian Foreign Policy Concept, soft power is used by some international actors in a rather destructive and illegitimate way (Government of the Russian Federation, 2013). Russian experts often refer to the US, which they see as preferring to use soft power as an addition to military/coercive instruments rather than as its only foreign policy method (Konyshchev and Sergunin, 2012; Kubyshkin and Tzvetkova, 2013). Many Russian experts are also increasingly persuaded by Nye's idea of smart power where 'in a smart power strategy, hard and soft [power] reinforce each other' (Nye, 2013). These analysts argue that while Russia should copy American 'best practices', it should also aim to develop a more effective model of soft power strategy (Kosachev, 2012a; Kubyshkin and Sergunin, 2012; Kubyshkin and Tzvetkova, 2013; Lukyanov, 2009; Tsygankov, 2013a and 2013b).

Upon his 2012 re-election, President Putin called on Russian foreign policy makers to think about the use of non-traditional foreign policy instruments, including soft power tools (Putin, 2012c). Russia's need for soft power capabilities was also acknowledged in the new Russian Foreign Policy Concept of February 2013, which was elevated to the status of official Kremlin strategy. The rise of the Kremlin's interest in the soft power concept coincided with serious changes in Russia's foreign policy philosophy.

Comprehending Russia's foreign policy philosophy

Western analysts often apply the 'power transition theory' (PTT), designed by and associated now mainly with A.F.K. Organski (1958), to explain the foreign policy behaviour of states, including Russia. Although this theory has had many later variations (especially after the end of the Cold War) (Kugler and Lemke, 1996; Lemke, 2002; Organski and Kugler, 1980; Tammen, 2000; Wittkopf, 1997), its typology of states' international behaviour remains more or less intact. The PTT identifies two types of world powers – *status quo* and *revisionist*. Organski and Kugler (1980) defined *status quo* states as those who participated in designing 'the rules of the game' and stood to benefit from these rules. In other words, these states are interested in maintaining the *status quo* of the international system. Challengers or 'revisionist states' want a new place for themselves in the international system, commensurate with their power. Revisionist states express general dissatisfaction with their position in the international system, and they have a desire to redraft the rules by which relations among nations work. Present-day Russia is often labelled as a revisionist state that aims to expand its sphere of influence – be it in the Arctic or the post-Soviet space.

However, this article argues that the PTT does not hold much explanatory power with regards to Russia's present-day international behaviour. Russia is neither a *status quo* power that aims to keep the main international system rules intact nor a revisionist one that aspires to radically change those rules. Rather, Russia (similar to some other countries such as, for example, the

rest of the BRICS [Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa] is a *reformist* state. Reformist states differ from the two previously mentioned ideal types of international actors in their motivation and methods. Such states are unsatisfied with the existing rules of the 'game' but do not want to change them radically. Rather, they aim to reform these rules in order to adapt them to new global realities and to make them more fitting for all members of the world community. A reformist state prefers to act on the basis of existing rules and norms rather than to challenge them. It envisages that all changes (reforms) should be made gradually through negotiations and to the benefit of all the parties involved. One may distinguish between more, or less assertive, reformist actors, but even most assertive ones can hardly be seen as revisionist states. Moreover, the PTT often ignores the fact that in reality its 'ideal types' are quite rare, while the 'mixed' or 'hybrid' versions are more common. This is true in the case of Russia, whose global behaviour can be described as reformist, while regionally it can be characterised as either *status quo* (Central, East and North Europe, Central Asia, the Far East) or (exceptionally) revisionist (Ukraine).

The concept of 'peaceful coexistence' (PCC) fits nicely into reformist powers' political philosophy even if it may not be part of their active vocabulary (as in the case of Russia). It can be applied to explain the foreign policy behaviour of many *status quo* and reformist powers, including Russia. The Kremlin believes that countries with different socio-economic and political systems can coexist peacefully. The majority of the international community members agree to play by existing rules, but want to make them more just and appropriate to changing realities. They do not accept that one or more dominant state(s) should be able to impose rules on the rest of the world; instead they favour a multipolar/polycentric world model (the concept which is now dominant in Russian foreign policy discourse).

However, Russia's present-day interpretation of the PCC is different from the original Soviet version. First and foremost, the Soviet and post-Soviet concepts have different ideological underpinnings: the Soviet version was based on Marxist-Leninist ideology, while the current one has no clear ideological foundation (a so-called 'national idea' has not yet developed). The long-term goals of the present day PCC are also different. In the Soviet era, the PCC's strategic aim was elimination of world capitalism and the worldwide victory of socialism. The coexistence concept was a strategy for the transitional period and it did not replace the class struggle principle – one of the most important theoretical concepts of Marxism-Leninism. Currently, Moscow has no such revolutionary or radical objective. Thus, the concept is more defensive than offensive in character.

Furthermore, there are also completely different geopolitical contexts. In the Cold War era the USSR was a superpower and a leader of the socialist world. Post-Soviet Russia has lost its superpower status and seeks to secure its 'normal great power' status. Moscow does not lead any powerful coalitions or alliances. In the wake of the Ukrainian crisis it found itself in semi-isolation. Geopolitically, Russia is in a situation comparable to the position of the post-revolutionary/post-civil war Soviet Russia – the moment when the Lenin-Chicherin peaceful coexistence doctrine was born at the Genoa conference of 1922.

The new (in a sense that 'the new is what has been forgotten') Russian political philosophy, based on the ideas of multipolarity and 'coexistence', was first delivered in Putin's now-famous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference (Putin, 2007). Despite its assertive tone, Putin's Munich speech did not aim to undermine the existing world order. Rather, it accused the US and its NATO allies of revisionist intentions and called for the reform/adjustment of the international system to make it more comfortable, secure and compatible

with international legal norms. As an alternative to the unipolar world based on the rule of force, Putin suggested a multipolar model based on the rule of international law.

The 2007 Munich speech was a turning-point in the development of Putin's worldview, a landmark that laid the foundations of his international course whose basic principles still remain intact. The new/old Russian foreign policy philosophy of 'coexistence' and reformism has paved a way to the search of international strategies that are alternative to hard power policies. The soft power concept coined by Joseph Nye was seen by the Kremlin as relevant to the new foreign policy.

It should be noted that the Russian political leadership and academic community have interpreted the soft power concept differently from Nye's original version. According to Nye, soft power is one of the three possible ways to exercise power and accomplish an actor's goals – coercion, payment or attraction – and he associates soft power with the latter method. However, as Nye emphasises, powers such as China or Russia, who proclaimed their adherence to the soft power concept for various reasons, fail to become attractive to targeted international audiences. According to Nye, one of the basic mistakes made by China and Russia is that they did not realise that 'the development of soft power need not be a zero-sum game. All countries can gain from finding each other attractive' (Nye, 2013). Many Chinese and Russian soft power initiatives often pursue overtly pragmatic, interest-based goals rather than aim to take into account international partners' interests and, for this reason, are met with suspicion or even hostility.

Russian political leaders have largely interpreted the soft power concept in a very instrumental and pragmatic way. Initially, it was perceived by Moscow as an instrument of policy towards its compatriots in post-Soviet countries. For example, in 2008 the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (2008) commented:

Nowadays the growing role is played by the so-called 'soft power' – an ability to affect the environment through civilisational, humanitarian, cultural, foreign policy and other forms of attractiveness. I believe that the whole grammar of our diverse links with compatriots should be constructed precisely with account of these factors.

With the start of Putin's third presidential term in 2012, the Kremlin moved to a broader – but still instrumentalist – understanding of soft power. Its soft power strategy is now seen as a set of foreign policy 'technologies' that help to achieve Moscow's goals with regards to particular states and – more generally – strengthen Russian positions worldwide (not only in the CIS). For instance, the Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 underlined:

Soft power has become an indispensable component of contemporary international politics, which is a complex set of instruments for resolving foreign policy tasks backed by potential of civil society, information and communication, humanitarian and other methods and technologies, alternative to a classical diplomacy.

The promotion of Russia's positive image abroad is considered to be an important priority in its soft power strategy. As the above doctrine emphasises, this should be done through the development of 'effective means of information influence on public opinion abroad' as well as through strengthening the positions of the Russian language and culture abroad, *inter alia* with support of compatriots (Government of the Russian Federation, 2013).

Some prominent Russian analysts link the concept of soft power to a new, broader, reading of security (Gronskaya and Makarychev, 2010; Rusakova, 2010; Tsygankov, 2013a and 2013b).

These analysts believe that in the post-Cold War era 'security' includes not only hard (military), but also soft (non-military) dimensions, including economic, political, societal, environmental, human and information strands. By the same token, they maintain that power in international relations is gradually changing its nature; it is now less coercive and softer. For these Russian theorists, the hard power strategy is associated with military power while soft power is linked to non-military attributes such as a viable economy, political strength, a healthy society, sustainable ecology, attractive culture and efficient public diplomacy (Konyshev and Sergunin, 2014; Lukyanov, 2009; Troitski, 2011). In other words, this Russian IR school suggests a different and broader understanding of the soft power concept than Nye's definition. In fact, it includes all non-military instruments and resources available for international actors. However, it also contradicts Nye's definition because he excludes coercion as well as economically driven influence ('payment' in his terminology) from soft power.

It should be noted that along with the significant deviation of Russia's interpretation of soft power from Nye's definition, there is also a lack of clarity and uniformity in the terminology used by Russian academics and politicians. For example, there are several overlapping concepts, such as 'NGO-diplomacy' (non-governmental organisations' international activities), 'popular diplomacy' (people-to-people international contacts), 'public diplomacy' (Russia's policies that are addressed to the civil society of foreign countries rather than to their governments) and the 'humanitarian dimension' of foreign policy (similar to the notion of public diplomacy). These are all commonly used in Russia when referring to soft power. Although Russian experts differ in their reading of these concepts, the general trend in Russian mainstream thinking is to see 'soft power' as an integrative term that encompasses all the above-mentioned notions.

To sum up, radical shifts in Russia's foreign policy philosophy have made the soft power concept both desirable and palatable to Kremlin strategists. The analysis will now focus on what soft power potential is available for Russia and how effectively it has been used by Moscow.

Soft power: potential and resources

According to Nye, soft power is, first and foremost, an ability to be attractive. To quote Nye (2004, p. 11), 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)'. As mentioned above, Russian theorists believe that there are also economic dimensions to soft power, albeit these can also effectively serve as hard power instruments.

The Russian political class believes that the country possesses huge soft power potential but it is often misused or used ineffectively. It is worth mentioning that Russian soft power strategists view the Soviet experience of international propaganda and positive image-making as useful. As noted by Feodor Lukyanov (2013), this experience proved quite efficient and can be re-installed quite easily if staffed with sufficient resources. The former head of *Rosstrudnichestvo*, Konstantin Kosachev, acknowledged that his agency was a logical successor of 'the traditions and practical skills which [had] emerged yet in the old Soviet times' (Kosachev, 2012b). According to Kosachev (2012b), the Soviet Union actively utilised soft power techniques and, for this reason, its international reputation was very high. In practical

terms, a re-launching of the system of 'friendship societies' with foreign countries has been proposed, as well as the organisation of the Festival of Youth and Students in 2017.

Prior to the Ukrainian crisis, the international consulting company Ernst & Young ranked Russia third among the emerging markets and tenth among the top global soft powers (Ernst & Young, 2012, pp. 10 and 14). Moscow emphasised the economic aspects of its soft power in its policies in the post-Soviet space while it relied mostly on cultural and political instruments in the 'far abroad' (which did not exclude the use of some economic leverage, such as relatively cheap energy supplies). For example, Moscow tried to promote itself as an attractive economic power (the source of investment, a reliable energy supplier, a promising market for foreign consumer goods and labour force, etc.) in the post-Soviet space in order to develop the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) projects. Prior to the Ukrainian crisis, Moscow managed to convince the EU countries that it could be a reliable economic partner rather than a source of severe socio-economic problems (e.g. illegal migration or smuggling) for its European neighbours. With the introduction of the Baltic Pipeline System in 2001 and the Nord Stream gas pipeline in 2011, Russia reinforced its position as the main energy supplier for Europe.

The 'cultural component' of Russia's soft power is based on the attractiveness of Russian 'high' culture throughout the world and in neighbouring countries. For example, the Russian Ministry of Culture sponsors the Golden Mask annual theatre festival, which presents Russia's most prominent performers to the Baltic public. Cultural exchanges between Russia and other post-Soviet states have tended to grow as well. The Russian higher education system is still attractive for students from the former Soviet republics because the best Russian universities in Moscow, St Petersburg and some other provincial cities are still able to provide foreign students with good training in the 'hard' sciences as well as the humanities.

Russian diasporas in the post-Soviet states are viewed by the Kremlin as a channel for projecting soft power. For example, in relation to the Baltic States, Moscow possesses a unique resource with the Russian speaking population constituting about a third of the overall population in Latvia and Estonia. These communities are relatively consolidated (despite some internal controversies). They often feel discriminated against by the local regimes and do 'not identify themselves with new statehood' (Lukyanov, 2009), but still appreciate a number of advantages provided by the Baltic States' independence. In general, the Russian-speaking minorities in the post-Soviet countries view Moscow as a natural protector and have a rather positive attitude to Russia and Russian culture.

In the pre-Crimean era, Moscow made great strides in improving its bilateral relations with many European countries. In addition to Russia's friendly relations with Finland in the post-Second World War period, Moscow sought to improve its relations with Lithuania and Sweden as well as to 'repair' its complicated bilateral ties with Denmark (because of the 2002 Chechen Congress in Copenhagen), Estonia (after the 2007 'Bronze Soldier' conflict), Latvia and Poland (both of which have had numerous historical conflicts with Russia). Dmitry Medvedev's 2009 European Security Treaty (EST) proposal aimed to strengthen the regional security system (Sergunin, 2010).

The Russian Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) presidency programme for 2012–2013 was specially designed to promote a sub-regional soft power agenda, including trade, investment, ecology, cross-border cooperation, people-to-people contacts and cultural initiatives. Moscow's ambition was not only to promote universal values (such as the prevention of

radicalism and extremism as well as the protection of children's rights in the region), but to export what were perceived to be Russian traditions of inter-ethnic and inter-religious tolerance and multiculturalism (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2012, p. 7). This is viewed as a specific Russian soft power resource. The active strengthening of people-to-people contacts and the facilitation of visa regimes in the region could be considered by the regional public to be a source of attractiveness originating in Russia's foreign policy. The Ukrainian crisis, however, has undermined Russia's soft power efforts in Europe and other regions.

Institutions and mechanisms

The process of soft power's institutionalisation in Russia started even before the term itself became part of the official vocabulary. In 2007, the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) Foundation was established by a presidential decree (although with NGO status). The Foundation's main function is to promote the Russian language, culture and education system abroad. The ideological background and authorship of the title 'Russian World' is often ascribed to Petr Shedrovitsky. He argued that 'during the 20th century as a result of tectonic historical shifts, world wars, and revolutions, the *Russian World* as a network structure of large and small communities thinking in and speaking the Russian language emerged' (Shedrovitsky, 2000). The Russian world, based on cultural and communication resources of the Russian language, is then interpreted as soft power capital that can be utilised for agenda-setting (images of the future) and strengthening the sustainability of Russia's statehood ('the more people and communities need Russia, the more sustainable it is').

For example, the *Russkiy Mir* nominates the best teachers and students of the Russian language and culture for the position of 'Professor of the *Russkiy Mir*' and 'Student of the *Russkiy Mir*'. It also has fellowship and internship programmes for foreign scholars and students to be hosted in Russia. The Foundation organises various conferences, competitions and olympiads on a regular basis. In 2008, the *Rosstrudnichestvo*, Federal Agency for the CIS (Compatriots Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation) was established with nearly the same mission as *Russkiy Mir* but with governmental status under the Foreign Ministry. As then President Medvedev put it, the agency was to become 'the key instrument of the so-called soft power' (Government of the Russian Federation, 2012). Today the agency has representative offices in almost all European countries, the US, Canada and major Asian, African and Latin American states. In addition to these two main institutions, a number of (often state-affiliated) NGOs, such as the Gorchakov Foundation for Public Diplomacy, Andrei Pervozvanny Fund, International Foundations for Working with Diasporas Abroad 'Rossiyane', International Council of Russian Compatriots, Library 'Russian-language Literature Abroad' and International Association of Twin Cities partake in soft power activities.

Historically, the City of Moscow was a pioneer in pursuing its 'foreign policy' in the post-Soviet space. In 1999, the Moscow Foundation for Support of Compatriots (named after Yuri Dolgorukiy) was established by the decree of then Mayor Yuri Luzhkov (later it was transformed into the Moscow Foundation for International Cooperation). The Foundation had a scholarship programme for Russian-speaking students, mostly targeting compatriots in the CIS and the Baltic countries. For example, Russian businesses invested in a network of the Houses of Moscow which should serve as 'centres of culture and business cooperation' (Dom Moskvyy, n.d.). Currently, there are six houses – in Bishkek, Minsk, Riga, Sofia, Sukhumi and Yerevan (MTsMS, n.d.a). In 2010, following Luzhkov's resignation, the Foundation was

reorganised into two separate units under the control of the Department of Foreign Economic and International Relations: the Moscow Centre for International Cooperation (MTsMS, n.d.b) and the Moscow House of Compatriots (Moscow City Government, n.d.).

The growing activism in the sphere of soft power policy is also demonstrated by the Russian northwestern regions, which 'specialise' in developing twinning and humanitarian contacts to contribute to the support of compatriots abroad. For example, St Petersburg, the Leningrad Oblast, Kaliningrad and Karelia are traditionally active in twinning with neighbouring foreign towns and various European regions (Joenniemi and Sergunin, 2012). Programmes of cooperation with compatriots have recently been launched by some of these regions.

The Russian higher education system has gradually built up its soft power potential. It is becoming internationalised *via* the introduction of the Bologna Process and has increased the state quota for foreign students to be trained in Russian universities. The frameworks for academic exchanges are diversifying. The state-funded 'slots' for study in Russian universities are distributed through Russian embassies, with 70–100 'slots' for each country annually. A number of leading universities (such as Moscow State University, St Petersburg State University and the Higher School of Economics) organise student enrolment independently through competitions. The leading regional universities, such as Kant Baltic Federal University (Kaliningrad), St Petersburg-based universities, Kuban State University, Voronezh State University and Siberian and Far Eastern universities, have numerous collaboration programmes with partner universities in neighbouring countries, including joint undergraduate and graduate programmes and research projects.

The Russian academic community is also quite active in using professional associations to increase its soft power capabilities. For example, Russia's northwestern universities play a prominent role in the Baltic Sea Region University Network and promote academic exchanges in the region. As stressed by then Prime Minister Putin (2012a), 'we should increase our educational and cultural presence in the world by several times, and increase it on the order in those countries, where a part of population is speaking or understanding Russian language'.

Finally, one should not forget the role played by the Russian Orthodox Church in soft power strategies. For example, the Russian Orthodoxy played the role of both a 'back channel' and an informal mediator between Russia, Georgia and Ukraine during the crisis years. Experts agree that its international presence increased after the election of Kirill as a Patriarch, but are split over its perception abroad. As one Latvian expert wrote, 'religious freedom, highly regarded in the West, offers some degree of legitimacy to the international activities of the Russian Orthodox Church' (Kudors, 2010, p. 3). According to Lukyanov, this is one of the main assets of Russia's soft power, but 'foreign counteragents are frightened by it even more than by traditional leverages' (Lukyanov, 2009). To overcome such accusations, some Russian experts suggest positioning the Orthodox Church as a transnational organisation (Tezisy, 2012, p. 51).

The limits and constraints of Russia's soft power

Post-Soviet countries are quite suspicious about Moscow's soft power policies in this region. Both the policy-oriented and research literature is replete with critical assessments of Russian soft power efforts, especially in the post-Soviet space. According to one account, 'unlike the

traditional definition of soft power, Russia's soft power does not display emphasis on legitimacy and moral authority.... It serves to divide rather than unite and to arouse apprehension rather than provide comfort' (Grygas, 2012). For example, the Baltic States' complaint list includes 'creation, maintenance and support of Kremlin-friendly networks of influence in the cultural, economic and political sectors', dissemination of biased information, local agenda-setting through the Russian state-controlled media, and making compatriots primarily loyal to the Kremlin. Western experts believe that Russia's main objective is to undermine the statehood of post-Soviet states and enhance the sphere of its influence. Another interpretation sees Moscow as 'seeking to exploit the Western concept of "soft power" ... reframing it as a euphemism for coercive policy and economic arm-twisting' (Minzarari, 2012). Some Russian experts, in fact, echo this observation by saying that the concept of 'soft power' has two meanings: narrow, linked primarily to attractiveness; and broad, the ability to change the policy preferences of others (Troitski, 2011). The second meaning, in practical terms, is very close to the notion of 'hard power'.

If we look at specific areas of Russia's soft power policies, foreign experts have been fairly critical of Moscow's economic policies. For example, Russia's energy potential has often been perceived as an 'energy weapon' – i.e. a hard rather than soft power instrument. As for the 'cultural dimension' of Russia's soft power policies, Russian 'high' culture has proved difficult to instrumentalise for practical purposes. In part, Russia's rich cultural traditions are often overshadowed by negative perceptions of current political developments in this country (Troitski, 2011). Moreover, in contrast with 'high' culture, contemporary Russian popular culture, lifestyle and media products seem to be less attractive for foreigners, even for Russia's compatriots. The (excessive) presence of Russia-made entertainment and news in the local media is often viewed as a threat to constructing a 'true' national or European identity. It is often claimed that ethnic minorities in post-Soviet countries live in a Russian 'information space', which allegedly undermines their loyalty to their states of domicile. In general, one may find that attitudes of Russian compatriots towards Russia are quite ambiguous. On the one hand, they express certain affinity with Russia and even with the ruling political regime (e.g. vast majority of the Russian citizens residing in Estonia voted for Putin in 2012). On the other hand, when they are able to make a choice about where to get education and/or where to migrate, they prefer Europe or North America to Russia.

The role of compatriots in Russia's soft power strategy has been subject to criticism as well. As identified by a Polish expert, 'Russian policy in this regard seems to contradict the concept of soft power: instead of winning people over who do not share Russia's foreign principles and goals, the country seeks to mobilize those who already agree with them' (Ćwiek-Karpowicz, 2012). Besides, soft power is often perceived by local political elites as creating a Russian 'fifth column' that works against independent statehood. Statements made about the need to consolidate Russian compatriots abroad (which can be realistically achieved only in the Baltic States) exacerbate existential fears even more (Conley et al., 2011). With the start of the Ukrainian crisis, the hostile attitude of the Baltic States to Moscow's efforts to develop cooperation with compatriots has significantly increased. The allegations that 'we are the next on Russia's list' and that the 'Donbass scenario' can be repeated in the Baltic States have become widespread in the Baltic media.

At the same time, some Russian experts believe that Moscow's ability to use compatriots as a soft power instrument is often over-estimated, since the size of Russian communities in the

post-Soviet states is decreasing, while their cultural and political orientations are getting more diverse, complicating the task of their consolidation. As one Russian analyst argues:

[T]hey [Russian communities] are unlikely to be the resource, the instrument of the Russian soft power, rather, they might be its target, provided that under soft power we understand not a set of political spinning technologies but the development of strong ties with our compatriots based on business, scientific cooperation, interaction in the field of education and culture and, of course, political support. (Smirnov, 2012)

Regarding the attractiveness of the Russian political values, as many foreign experts maintain, Russia struggles to harmonise its traditional values with internationally recognised democratic values and standards. As argued by Kosachev (2012a), on the one hand, ‘freedom, democracy, rule of law, social stability and respect for human rights have become “a consumer basket” of the modern world’. On the other hand, ‘there are differences in their [values] *individual manifestation* due to national, historical and other specifics’ (Kosachev, 2012a; emphasis in original). To put it differently, Moscow finds it a challenge to persuade others that it shares universal values and that it is ready to disseminate them throughout the world. Equally, Russia is unable to make its domestic socio-economic and political model attractive and sell it to other nations. Even Kosachev (2012a) admits that Russia cannot export its specific model since ‘it has not developed any such model yet’.

Moscow is also short of efficient foreign policy tools in the soft power domain. None of Russia’s large-scale foreign policy initiatives (including the EST draft and the Russian CBSS presidency programme) gained solid international support. The Kremlin sometimes does not take into account ‘local peculiarities’ in its soft power activities. For example, the three Baltic republics suffer from an ‘inferiority complex’ because their local statehood and identities are still in their formative phase. The very process of state- and identity-building is often based on the negative ‘othering’ of Russia. In this context, any Russian soft power efforts are interpreted as attempts to breach Baltic sovereignty, identities and security. Besides, Russia is repeatedly blamed for having a ‘hidden plan’ to reintegrate the Baltic States into its sphere of influence.

To continue the analysis of Russian soft power’s shortcomings, it should be noted that Moscow’s instruments in this field are predominantly ‘statist’ – i.e. government-based and controlled. Harnessing the potential of NGOs is not a priority for Russia. Those NGOs that are ‘officially’ allowed to participate in soft power activities are, in reality, semi-governmental and perceived by ‘target audiences’ in the post-Soviet countries accordingly. From Nye’s point of view, Russia’s neglect of civil society’s role in soft power politics is a serious mistake. According to Nye (2013), much of America’s soft power is produced by civil society – from universities and foundations to cinema and popular culture – rather than by the government.

Moscow often tends to forget what Nye (2004, p. 17) wrote about the interaction between the government and non-governmental sectors in the soft power sphere: governments should ‘make sure that their own actions and policies reinforce rather than undercut their soft power’. On a number of occasions the Kremlin has undercut the activities of Russian regions, municipalities, private companies, universities and NGOs that aimed to promote cooperation with international partners in the economic and humanitarian spheres.

The lack of transparency (and its natural ‘satellite’ – corruption) is another grave shortcoming of Russia’s soft power policies. Moscow’s soft power initiatives are often oriented either to the

relatively narrow circles of local political elites or to certain (pro-Kremlin) parts of Russian communities in post-Soviet countries who are ironically called 'professional compatriots'. As one expert notes,

Lithuania is lucky with the main Russian problem of corruption. That's why the major part of Russian projects aimed at strengthening attractiveness among the former republics of the USSR is sinking in the backwater of corruption, and Lithuania can feel quieter. (BaltInfo, 2012)

Duplication is another problem for Russian soft power policies in the post-Soviet space. For example, there is no clear division of labour between the *Rosstrudnichestvo* and *Russkiy Mir*. As a result, their partners in foreign countries are often puzzled by the rather chaotic and competing activities of these two leading Russian soft power agencies.

Conclusions

It has been argued in this article that the Kremlin's turn to the soft power concept over the past decade was not accidental. A number of powerful factors, such as the need to redesign its foreign policy doctrine in line with present-day standards, to improve its international image and to strengthen Russia's global prestige (especially in the post-Soviet space), encouraged Moscow to familiarise itself with this concept. Since the late 2000s it has been deeply embedded in Russia's foreign policy discourse and machinery.

In contrast to some widely held stereotypes, the analysis above shows that Moscow did not limit itself to simply copying the soft power concept wholesale. This article argues that the Russian understanding of soft power strongly deviates from either the 'classical', Nye-based one or those suggested by other Western academics and practitioners. The Russian interpretation of soft power is instrumentalist, pragmatic and interest-centric. As demonstrated earlier, the Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 defines soft power as a 'set of instruments' that can be helpful for achieving foreign policy aims by means of civil society institutions, information technology and communication interactions, humanitarian outreach and other methods that differ from classical diplomacy. President Putin was even more pragmatic and instrumentalist by defining the concept as a foreign policy tool or technology that helps either to promote Moscow's interests in foreign countries or to improve Russia's international image (Putin, 2012b and 2012c).

The lack of a well-defined terminology and the use of overlapping concepts is another remarkable feature of Russian scholarship on soft power. To make further theoretical progress, Russian academia might wish to develop its conceptual apparatus and reach a consensus on basic terms related to the soft power *problematique*. Unlike other analysts who prefer to pay attention to specific aspects of Russia's soft power strategy rather than producing a comprehensive analysis of it, we believe that the soft power strategy as a whole represents a combination of ideational and material motives. On the one hand, the Kremlin sees soft power as an important instrument in reclaiming and maintaining Russia's great power status, shaping the future world order and making the West (particularly the US) abide by the rules of that order. On the other hand, Moscow – in a very pragmatic way – views its soft power strategy as an efficient tool in promoting its national interests in foreign countries, building coalitions and counterbalancing the West in the global geopolitical game.

This article agrees with other authors that at the moment Russia's soft power has a rather mixed level of performance. On the one hand, Russia possesses huge soft power resources of

an economic, societal, political and cultural nature. On the other hand, Moscow is often unable to use these resources in a coherent way. As Nye (2013) pointed out, 'for China and Russia to succeed, they will need to match words and deeds in their policies, be self-critical, and unleash the full talents of their civil societies'.

Is Russia able to effectively implement its soft power strategy? Unlike other experts who often succumb to the temptation to give straightforward and simple (sometimes even simplistic) answers to this important question, we prefer a more nuanced and measured approach. In general, our answer is 'yes' because one can identify numerous examples of the effectiveness Russia's soft power diplomacy, especially in post-Soviet countries (e.g. the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) as a new centre of regional economic integration). Moscow has therefore managed to differentiate its soft power strategies between post-Soviet and Western countries. In the case of the 'near abroad', Moscow emphasises instruments such as economic attractiveness and compatriots. In the case of the West, the Kremlin prefers a combination of the energy 'carrot' and cultural tools.

However, it goes without saying that the above-mentioned shortcomings (especially the lack of coordination between various governmental bodies responsible for soft power policies as well as between the government and NGOs) and a series of international crises, including Georgia and Ukraine, make Russian soft power policies less efficient and sometimes undermine successful strategies in neighbouring regions. Thus, there is still a long way to go to bring Moscow's soft power strategy into line with widely accepted standards and for Russia to be understood more widely as an attractive international partner.

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