

INSTRUMENTALIZING THE SOURCES OF ATTRACTION. HOW RUSSIA UNDERMINES ITS OWN SOFT POWER

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Abstract

The 2011-2013 domestic protests and the 2013-2015 Ukraine crisis have brought to the Russian politics forefront an increasing preoccupation for the soft power. The concept started to be used in official discourses and documents and a series of measures have been taken both to avoid the ‘dangers’ of and to streamline Russia’s soft power. This dichotomous approach towards the ‘power of attraction’ have revealed the differences of perception of the soft power by Russian officials and the Western counterparts. The present paper will analyse Russia’s efforts to control and to instrumentalize the sources of soft power, trying to assess the effectiveness of such an approach.

Keywords: **Russian soft power, Russian foreign policy, public diplomacy, Russian mass media, Russian internet**

Introduction

The use of term *soft power* is relatively new in the Russian political circles, however, it has become recently increasingly popular among the Russian analysts, policy makers and politicians. The term *per se* was used for the first time in Russian political discourse in February 2012 by Vladimir Putin. In the presidential election campaign, the then candidate Putin drew attention to the fact that *soft power* – “a set of tools and methods to achieve foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence” is used frequently by “big countries, international blocks or corporations” “to develop and provoke extremist, separatist and nationalistic attitudes, to manipulate the public and to directly interfere in the domestic policy of sovereign countries” (Putin 2012). He was advocating that this kind of influence should be exerted “in the open” in order to attract the responsibility of the actors involved .

One year after, the term *soft power* was introduced for the first time in a Russian official document – in Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации [The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation], approved by President Putin on 12 February 2013. This document that describes the principles, priorities, goals and objectives of Russia's foreign policy defines soft power as “a comprehensive toolkit for achieving foreign policy objectives building on civil society potential, information, cultural and other methods and technologies alternative to traditional diplomacy” and acknowledges its “indispensability” in modern international relations. Yet, similar to Putin's definition, the Concept highlights that soft power can be also used in a “destructive and unlawful” way for putting pressure on sovereign states, interfering in their internal affairs, destabilizing their political situation or manipulating public opinion (Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации 2013).

This dichotomous perception of the soft power has led the Kremlin to take a number of steps to prevent the “destructive” consequences of this power and to increase its effectiveness in achieving foreign policy goals. However, these steps taken by the Russian government contradict the very logic of the ‘power of attraction.’

Nationalizing the soft power

Hard power and soft power are related. However, while hard power is defined as the ability to compel others to comply with your wishes by means of force or other direct forms of coercion (Sherr 2013: 12), Nye describes soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (Nye 2004: X), thus by co-opting rather than by coercing people. Soft power does not depend on hard power, is difficult to exercise, and it also cannot be controlled by the government to the same degree as the hard power (Nye 2004: 14). The resources that underlie a country's soft power are: its culture (high culture – literature, art and education, and popular culture – mass entertainment), its political values and its foreign policy. When these resources are seen as attractive and legitimate in the eyes of others, the soft power of the country in question is enhanced. If its culture, ideology, domestic values or foreign policy are attractive, other countries will willingly follow them. However, when domestic or foreign policies of a country are hypocritical, arrogant, indifferent to the opinion of others, or based on a narrow approach to national interests, they will

undermine the soft power of the country in question. It is not enough to proclaim some politically attractive values like democracy or human rights you have to respect them both domestically and in international relations. In other words, soft power should be understood also as the ability to influence others by example.

Many soft power resources, especially the cultural one, are separate from the governments and may only partly respond to the state efforts. Furthermore, soft power resources often work indirectly by shaping the environment for policy, they are slower, more diffuse and more difficult to manage than the hard power resources, sometimes taking years to produce the desired outcomes (Nye 2004: 99). However, Moscow has a state-centered approach when it comes to the soft power as well.

The Kremlin showed its “reluctance” towards the private sector and the civil society already during Vladimir Putin’s first presidential term, when major media outlets were put under state control, either directly or by means of state-owned or state-controlled companies; and regulations concerning the activities of international NGOs were tightened. The Kremlin became even more preoccupied with the civil society after the “Snow Revolution” (December 2011 – July 2013 election protests) during which Moscow witnessed some of the biggest protests since the 1990s. Thus, in July 2012, the restrictive measures against NGOs were made even stricter when the Russian parliament adopted a law that obliged the NGOs engaged in “political activity” and receiving foreign donations to register as “foreign agents” (*Иностранный агент*), a term that in Russian mentality has strong association with the Cold War era espionage. At the moment of writing this paper (2015), there were 36 organizations registered as “foreign agents.” In May 2015, president Putin signed a bill that allows Russian authorities to ban foreign NGOs or firms designated “undesirable” as a “threat to the constitutional order and defense capability, or the security of the Russian state,” from operating in the country.

In addition, after the state took control of traditional media outlets (television, radio and newspapers), the Kremlin recently turned its attention towards new media (websites, blogs, online newspapers, social media, etc.). The impact of social media in Russia was most evident during the run-up to the presidential elections in 2012. It was for the first time when the number of critiques and demonstrations against the ‘selected one’ were significant and public (Thomas 2014: 122). Social media played a very important role in mobilization of people, the internet being the only media where Russians were able to express freely.

Aware of the ‘danger’ of the internet and social media, Russian authorities have taken a series of measures to contain the effectiveness of these means of communication. In June 2013 the Russian Parliament voted one of the toughest anti-piracy legislation in the world. Protection of intellectual propriety rights was needed in Russia but the sudden interest and the tough measures against the spread of unauthorized materials online appeared rather suspect since for many years Russian authorities had not done almost anything in this area. The law allows rights holders to directly sue the website which is hosting infringing material without contacting the rights holder first and in case the copyright holders wins the case and the website does not remove the content within 72 hours its IP address would be blocked. This provision aroused concerns as an IP address can be shared by more than one site. The bill entered into force on 1 August 2013 and one year later Roskomnadzor, the Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Telecom, Information Technologies and Mass Communications had blocked 12 sites and 99 IP addresses (some sites tried to avoid blocking by migrating to other IP addresses) (Izvestia 2014).

In 2014 the legislature took another important step towards increasing control over online content, by passing an amendment to an anti-terror bill that obligated all blogs with more than 3.000 daily visitors to register with state’s agency for media oversight, Roskomnadzor. Thus, they were subjected to similar restrictions to those applying to mass media outlets – *inter alia*, bans on electoral propaganda and obscene language. In addition the bloggers had to sign posts with their real names and they were made responsible for verifying the accuracy of all information posted on their blogs, including comments posted by others. Moreover, the “organizer of the dissemination of information on the Internet” has the obligation to store data within the territory of Russian Federation for 6 months (a similar law have Vietnam, China, Indonesia and India) and to “submit this information to the authorized state bodies carrying out operatively – search activity or for ensuring security of the Russian Federation” (kremlin.ru 2014). These measures allow state’s intelligence and mass media regulators to have a great control over Russian internet and aim also to intimidate political blogosphere, which does not have the same resources as mass media outlets to monitor content or fight costly lawsuits (Huffington Post 2014). It is important to mention that Russia’s largest domain registration center, *Ru-Center*, is informally controlled by the government and the Federal Security Service’s System

for Operative Investigative Measures program can also monitor Internet and telephone connections without court approval (Thomas 2014: 126).

Similar to the takeover of mass media outlets through state-owned or state-controlled companies during Putin's first presidential term, recently Moscow got control over Russian social media site VKontakte. After in January 2014, Pavel Durov, the founder of VKontakte, Russian version of Facebook, had sold his 12 per cent shares, in April the same year, he announced that he heard from the press that he had "resigned", stating that Igor Sechin, the executive chairman of Rosneft, a state owned oil company and a close ally and counselor of Vladimir Putin; and Alisher Usmanov the richest man in Russia and a good friend of president Putin, took complete control over the Russian number one social media site. VKontakte is the second most visited website in Russia behind Yandex with more than 50 million users, compared to Facebook's 7.8 million in the country (Business Insider 2014) and it was used by Russians to organize December 2011- July 2013 protests, and by Ukrainians anti-government protestors to support 2013-2014 Euromaidan manifestations. As we have already mentioned, the impact of social media was obvious during the run-up to the election of Vladimir Putin as president, in 2012 and Russian social media sites played an important role in mobilizing demonstrators against President Yanukovich in Ukraine as well. According to Durov, the Federal Security Service (FSB) had pressured him at the beginning of 2014 to disclose personal data of VKontakte users that were involved in Euromaidan protests. He refused, however, gradually ceding control of Russian most popular social network to the two investors close allies with Putin. It is to be mentioned that Alisher Usmanov also owns Mail.ru, a Russian Internet Company and two others Russian social networking sites – Odnoklassniki and MoyMir, second and third most popular social media websites in the country. Thus, after a recipe already experienced in the early 2000s on classical traditional media, the Kremlin succeeded in controlling a significant part of Russian internet as well.

In 2014, after Vladimir Putin declared that Internet is a CIA project (RT 2014), state-controlled Rostelecom launched a Kremlin-controlled internet search engine, Sputnik.ru. The portal offers approved links and helpful information to everyday life and is competing with Yandex and Google - the leading search engines in Russia. Despite Rostelecom officials' declarations that Sputnik.ru would not

engage in censorship, the fact that the engine offers only “safe search”, unchecked links not being allowed to appear in its results, suggests the inclination towards the opposite.

A new instrument Russia has used recently for influencing public opinions via internet are the so-called “trolls,” hired commentators and bloggers to post pro-Kremlin comments and articles on various websites. This strategy has been very active since Ukrainian crisis and went public after a document leaked to BuzzFeed (2014) showed that a firm called Internet Research Agency, based in Saint Petersburg employed people to promote pro-Kremlin comments on blogs. According to the document, the Agency has 600 employees whose daily tasks are to post comments on 50 news articles, to manage six Facebook accounts publishing at least three posts and to manage 10 Tweeter accounts with up to 2000 followers and 50 tweets/day. Two Russian media investigations conducted by Vedomosti (2014) and Novaya Gazeta (2014) have shown that the trolls’ campaign is directly orchestrated by the Kremlin. The presidency refrained from any comments.

These actions of Russian political leadership shows that Moscow is aware of the power of the civil society and its role in producing soft power. Yet, it does not accept the idea of relying on autonomous activities of civil society and non-state actors. While Nye suggests that soft power is inherently a product of civil society rather than solely a result of official government action, Russia is re-crafting the concept, accommodating it to “national conditions and above all the preservation of state sovereignty” (Wilson 2013: 22). Russia acknowledges the role of the civil society, however, it seeks to control it. Thus, Moscow is rejecting the idea of autonomous source of soft power, and “nationalizes” instead the internet and the NGOs, vilifies and harasses the bloggers or the non governmental organizations that criticize the power. In other words, Russia understands to adapt the soft power to the national conditions by having civil society structures under the watchful supervision of the state (Wilson 2013: 23) and seeking to have these structure is in the service of state not of the citizens.

The instrumentalization of the soft power

Moscow has a dichotomous approach towards soft power. It perceives the soft power simultaneously as a threat when it is employed by Western actors and as a pragmatic instrument that should serve Russian interests (Wilson 2013: 24). The 2013

Russian Foreign Policy Concept refers to soft power as to “an indispensable component of modern international relations”, however, warns that soft power can sometimes be used “illegally” or “destructively” in order “to exert political pressure on sovereign states, interfere in their internal affairs, destabilize their political situation, manipulate public opinion” (Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации 2013). Therefore, the Kremlin tries to remove the risks of threats of soft power by nationalizing the civil society and at the same time aims at instrumentalizing the soft power for its foreign policy goals. Moscow understands to have full control of and to use soft power only in the service of ‘state interests’.

In July 2012, during the meeting with Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives in international organisations, Putin defined soft power as being nothing but “all about promoting one’s interests and policies through persuasion and creating a positive perception of one’s country, based not just on its material achievements but also its spiritual and intellectual heritage” (kremlin.ru 2012). He also stated that Russia’s image abroad is often distorted, not reflecting the real domestic situation and the contribution to global civilization and culture because it is not formed only by Russians, and asked Russian diplomats to deal with the “failure to adequately explain our position,” to be more active in promoting Russian language, supporting the compatriots and Russian citizens living abroad and to promote the integration process in the CIS. However, this interpretation of soft power strategy reminds rather the public diplomacy.

Nye (2004: 105) described public diplomacy as the effort of the state to promote a positive national image. The concept “deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies.” It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; governments cultivating public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests from different countries; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications” (Jowett and O’Donnell 2012: 287). The advantage of public diplomacy in comparison with traditional diplomacy is that it is addressed directly to the public, which makes it more visible and more effective (Filimonov 2010).

In this logic fits the creation of the institutions *Russkii Mir*, *Rossotrudничество*, *Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Foundation*, and

especially the television *Russia Today (RT)*. Launched in December 2005 with the aim of presenting “an alternative perspective on major global events” (<http://rt.com/about-us/>) RT broadcasts now in three languages: English, Spanish and Arabic and boasts to have global coverage, in over 100 countries. In 2009, RT also launched a video agency that offers users free online access to broadcast RT footage. The television is also very present on Twitter, Facebook and Youtube. According to a 2012 Pew Research poll RT had the most Youtube videos of any new agency in the world (The Interpreter 2014). With 2.5000 employees and contractors worldwide, the annual budget of RT has been increased more than tenfold by Russian government since the launch of the television, from \$30 million in 2005 to \$445 million in 2014 (The Moscow Times 2015a). By comparison, the budget of France 24, which also broadcasts in three languages (French, English and Arabic) and is wholly owned by French government, is around €100 million; and the annual budget of Al Jazeera, the Arabic media outlet owned by the Qatari government, is estimated at \$100 million. CNN’s annual budget is around \$750 million, however, this money are allotted to both CNN U.S. and CNN International, and the outlet is owned by private company not by the government.

RT recorded an important image success in 2013 when former CNN icon, Larry King signed with them. The television gained Western audience by an anti-mainstream message. People interested in critical coverage or theories of conspiracy find in RT’s clever combination of entertainment and political messaging an alternative to Western news televisions. Moreover, RT adapts the message from one public to another. A recent survey has shown that while RT America and RT UK focus on stories strongly critical of the two governments, RT France prefers instead human interest stories (The Moscow Times 2015b). Generally RT manipulates Western audiences by spreading doubt and confusion especially about events Russia is involved directly or through proxies, as the case of Ukraine. Many guests presented as specialists have in fact little expertise and present conspiracy theories that are not supported by the facts. An example in this sense is Manuel Ochsenreiter who often is presented by RT as a guest representing the German point of view, but who is actually the editor of a neo-Nazi magazine, *Zuerst!* (The Interpreter 2014).

Another media instrument that presents pro-Kremlin interpretation of the world to foreign audience is the International Information Agency Rossiya Segodnya. Established in 2013 by a presidential decree, the institution absorbed news agency

RIA Novosti and Voice of Russia radio and is headed by Dmitry Kiselyov, Russia's chief propagandist, known in the West especially for his commentary on homosexuals and the statement made during Crimea crisis that "Russia is the only country in the world capable of turning the U.S.A. into radioactive dust" (Kiselyov 2014). The goal of Rossiya Segodnya is to "tell the global audience not only about Russia but about world events from Russian perspective" and to offer "information about the positions and interests of Moscow "at first hand," not only in the interpretation of foreign counterparts" (ria.ru).

In November 2014, Rossiya Segodnya launched an online and radio broadcast service for foreign audiences, named as the government's internet search engine, Sputnik. According to Kiselyov, Sputnik will provide "alternative interpretation" to the world "tired of the unipolar point of view" (sputnik.com 2014). The slogan of this service is "Sputnik tells the untold" and it currently offers news in 30 languages. However, as in the case of RT, Western media specialists and political observers have dismissed Sputnik as an instrument of Russian propaganda.

These internet and media services designed for foreign audiences show the preoccupation of Russian political leadership to influence public opinions abroad. They have been successful to certain public inclined toward conspiracy and who is not always looking for statements based on facts, however, they are far from being an impartial and credible source of information. In the perception of professionals that run Russian state media there is no objectivity or truth, everything is relative and there is only the interpretation of "infotainment" (Trudolyubov 2015). And this approach is visible in Russian media working for foreign audience. However, to be more efficient in influencing public opinions abroad, these media outlets prefer not to tell the world how Russia looks good (as did Soviet propaganda in the USSR) but focus instead on how the West looks bad (Trudolyubov 2015). On the whole, the Russian narrative internationally is designed to demoralize or destabilize the Western audiences (Jonsson & Seely 2015: 4) creating confusion and distrust in Western democratic regimes.

Yet, this is a dangerous strategy. In today's context of the explosion of information when people have difficulty discerning what to focus on, attention becomes an important resource. Reputation of a source of information becomes as important as ever and "political struggles occur over the creation and destruction of credibility" (Nye 2004: 106). Publics are becoming more wary about propaganda and

information that appears to be nothing more than propaganda may turn out to be counterproductive if it undermines someone else's reputation for credibility (Nye 2004: 107). Therefore, when Russian media outlets criticize the West for violations of democratic rights or disrespect for international law, in the absence of robust evidence and especially of own counterexamples; or when obviously subjective interpretations of facts are provided, they do nothing but undermine Russian public diplomacy and thus Moscow's soft power.

All these efforts of state to control the civil society and the access to information, to create governmental institutions for promoting a desired national image abroad, show that Russia perceives soft power as a state project, and an instrument of its foreign policy. Thus, while Nye sees the foreign policy of a country one of the sources of its soft power, for the Kremlin it is the soft power that is perceived as an instrument of foreign policy. More specifically, soft power is understood by Russian leadership rather as public diplomacy. In fact through soft power the Kremlin seeks to pursue objectives of public diplomacy as they were defined by Coombs & Holladay (2010: 299); increasing awareness (about flaws of Western democracies), managing reputations (promoting a desired national image abroad), changing legislation (by accusing the West of double standards) or altering attitudes (changing public opinions abroad about Russia; creating confusion about Western democracies). Thus, Russia understands soft power rather as the capacity to influence or manipulate public opinions in target countries (Ćwiek-Karpowicz 2012:1). Moscow has a state-centric vision on soft power, where the sources of attraction; civil society, media, culture, historic memories are transformed into instruments of foreign policy, when in fact the foreign policy should be a source of soft power.

Conclusions

The term soft power has become popular recently among Russian politicians. However, their approach towards the concept differs from how the West understands it. While the scholars highlight the fact that the soft power cannot be controlled by the governments in the same degree as the hard power, and that many soft power resources often work indirectly, are separate from the government and may only partly respond to the state purpose, the Kremlin sees soft power as a state-centric project and an instrument of its foreign policy.

Aware of the advantages and ‘dangers’ of soft power for its political aims, Moscow tries to accommodate it to “national conditions and above all the preservation of state sovereignty” (Wilson 2013: 22). Domestic and foreign policies, the norms of social and political life that are practiced in one state seeking to enhance its soft power are a strong source of its attractiveness abroad. However, it is impossible to create an appealing external image as long as you cannot deal effectively with domestic problems (Ćwiek-Karpowicz 2012: 1) or when you do not respect the norms and values you pretend to share.

Nyes suggests that soft power is inherently a product of civil society and that it cannot be totally controlled by governments. However, aware of the importance of civil society in generating soft power, the Kremlin does not accept the idea of relying on autonomous activities of civil society and non-state actors and seeks instead to get control on this source of soft power too. The solution found: the “nationalization” of media, the internet, and the civil society. The government has sought to take control of the NGOs, main social media websites and of great proportion of Russian internet and does not hesitate to vilify and harass the independent bloggers or the non governmental organizations that criticize the power. In the Kremlin’s vision the civil society activity should be first of all in the service of state and only after that in the service of citizens.

For Russia, soft power is perceived as an instrument of foreign policy. It has to serve state’s interests in the international affairs. Moscow understands to have full control of soft power and to use it only in the service of ‘state interests’. However, this approach can be dangerous and counterproductive. The targeted foreign audiences by Russian governmental ‘soft power’ become more wary about Moscow’s instrumentalization of the soft power resources and questions their reputation and credibility. Thus, instead of increasing the effectiveness of Russia’s power of attraction, the government actions of nationalization and instrumentalisation of the sources of attractiveness undermines their potential of generating soft power.

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