

# Soft and Hard Power, or the Problem of Russia's International Socialization

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This article<sup>1</sup> is about recent Russian foreign policy and the emergence of “soft power” policies in Vladimir Putin’s hegemonic project at home and abroad. Though Putin’s “iron fist” is well felt at the domestic level and in his near abroad, “soft power” has nonetheless become an indispensable ideological attribute of any regime developing its own domestic and foreign policy aims. After the Cold War and the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, the Russian government was confronted with several challenges related to the construction of not only its own national identity, but also its attitudes and behaviour with regard to the countries of the former Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc. Combining elements of soft and hard power while integrating into a process of international cooperation with the West and the emerging economies in Asia and Latin America constituted a real challenge to the Kremlin in a time the Russian economy had to adapt to new realities derived from a globalizing world economy. Russia becoming a major exporter of natural gas and oil made of both assets a backbone of its foreign economic policy on which it constructed a good part of its diplomacy and its cultural relations with the countries of the near abroad and Western Europe.

## Political relevance and topicality

Russia’s annexation of Crimea in early 2014 and the subsequent critical deterioration of relations between Moscow and the West have reignited the otherwise diminished interest to Russian and East European studies all across the world. Most of politicians and

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experts in Europe and North America have admitted that the Russian military offensive against Ukraine was an “eye-opening surprise” for their governments, and they underestimated the strength of neo-imperial momentum in Kremlin’s strategy. Henceforth, international relations as a discipline faces an almost forgotten challenge of properly understanding Russian intentions and policies, and translating the possible explanations in a policy relevant language.

Perhaps, the most intriguing question that is often asked in this respect is how consistent Russian international policies are. Indeed, the Kremlin has started its offensive interference in the Ukraine even without waiting for the end of the Sochi Olympics – an exorbitantly costly project aimed at improving Russian image in the West and allegedly intended to capitalize on Russia’s soft power resources. These intentions were apparently ruined by the seizure of Crimea and the constant military pressure on the government in Kyiv, followed by the crisis in Russia’s relations with the West, including Russia’s expulsion from the G8, the cancellation of “business-as-usual” relations with Moscow and the freezing of many diplomatic tracks. Against this background it could seem only natural to question any possible adherence of Russia to the ideas of further international socialization through

non-coercive soft power mechanisms that constitute the core of integrative toolkit in the West.

Yet instead of relinquishing the concept of power as an explanatory tool for Russian policies under Vladimir Putin, we in this volume deem that it needs further reconceptualization and reframing. Genealogically, the idea of soft power, as conceived by the American scholar Joseph Nye and his multiple followers, was from the outset connotative with the spread of democratic values and norms of governance. Yet the Putin regime’s policies made clear that authoritarian regimes can develop their own versions of soft power, based on the promotion of explicitly illiberal principles aimed at challenging the normative hegemony of the West. The Kremlin’s conservative turn that since 2011 evolved into the core element of the political philosophy of the Russian officialdom since the commencement of Putin’s third presidential term gives a good vindication for this.

The post-Communist Russian regime faced harsh domestic opposition (mass-scale protest movements questioning the legitimacy of the ruling elite) and strong international challenges (basically related to the far-reaching effects of the EU-launched Eastern Partnership program). Hence, special attention should be paid to policy projects that either include or are grounded in soft power resources, from cultural and sportive mega-events to the Moscow-sponsored Eurasian Union blueprint aimed at stabilizing Russia’s influence in the former republics of the Soviet Union, reconstituting Moscow’s domination on its neighbours and bringing

them under its economic, financial and cultural supervision. Connected to these are projects destined to establish a stable alliance with the former members-states of the Soviet Union and to protect its strategic pipeline system and natural resources Russia exports to the Asian countries and Western Europe. Germany has become Russia's particularly close partner in exportation of natural gas through the exploitation of the NordStream pipeline, while the SouthStream pipeline will extend Russia's influence to the southern part of Europe as well.

## Power in international relations

Everybody is familiar with hard power, because we know that military and economic might often get others to change their attitudes and behaviour. Yet many political leaders and opinion makers also focus on other assets when analysing foreign policy making of great powers. Walking with a big stick in the recent past used to be a method applied by the chancelleries of the main powers when dealing with problems in their backyards. Washington did it in the Caribbean and Central America when American interests

where challenged by local revolutionary movements. When Tsarist Russia became a full member of the international community under Catherine II and Alexander I the Cossacks could keep order in Central Europe when revolutionary upheavals occurred there and they even appeared in Paris after Napoleon's military defeat in 1815. But modern great powers cannot attain the outcomes they want by merely exercising forceful domination. Military intervention is an one-dimensional exercise of power only used in case of emergency or at moments of important international antagonisms between powers. Hence, most big powers also use tactics in order to keep peace by using other – "soft" – means of hegemony or by establishing rules and institutions or alliances destined to enforce a broader consensus among nations.

In most cases it is also a matter of mutually keeping in check the great powers who are themselves setting the rules of international behaviour. One can see that the Congress of Vienna of 1815 which dealt with the position of Napoleon also established a new balance of power between the most important European nations of that time.

This arrangement, however, did not prevent the breakout of several wars between the European powers, but these conflicts never would attain the scale of intensity of the previous Napoleonic wars. The most important wars were those conducted by Bismarck who realized Germany's unity under Prussian leadership by using force against Austria and France.

The First and Second World War were conflicts clearly surpassing any previous European wars because they also encompassed the United States and Japan or the European colonies in Asia and Africa. The outcome of both wars was that world politics would change considerably, especially with the rise of Soviet Russia as a global player and the subsequent independence of most colonies in the years after the Second World War. It was in this period, when the Cold War was structuring the behaviour and attitudes of all governments whose strife for increasing influence in world politics could be associated with exercising "soft power". Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others, but also of using a combination of inducements and disincentives in order to build a

POWER TABLE

	Behaviours	Primary currencies	Government policies
Military power	Coercion		Coercive diplomacy
	Deterrence	Threats	War
	Protection	Force	Alliance
Economic power	Inducement	Payments	Aid Bribes
	Coercion	Sanctions	Sanctions
Soft power	Attraction	Values Culture Policies	Public diplomacy Bilateral and multilateral diplomacy
	Agenda setting	Institutions	



large consensus among nations and to establish common goals or objectives. Soft-power resources can be used when setting the international agenda and co-opting policy goals or methods of other powers. Soft power appears as a structuring element in a system in which hegemony is exercised by economic, cultural and physical power(s) sharing common interests and values which are not contested by large and powerful domestic interest groups. During the Cold War, the United States could exert that hegemony not only by its economic and military predominance, but also by its soft power resources which was reinforced by the creation of several military alliances, military and economic aid, international institutions, consumers' products, fashion, etc. The Soviet Union's power was at that moment limited to its military presence in Central Europe and later in some developing countries, but without firmly establishing some kind of alternative soft power. All ruling communist parties paying tribute to Moscow were more or less depending on Soviet financial and military aid or trade agreements while they were forced to adopt systems of state-led accumulation policies.

### Russia's hard power

After the fall of the Communist regime in 1991 and the falling apart of the Soviet Union the illusion was spreading that with the "end of history" and the

definitive end of the Cold War a new world order would be established in which market economies and parliamentary regimes would dominate. This optimism was only partially confirmed in the countries of Central Europe, the Baltic countries and the Balkans, but not in all successor states of the Soviet Union where the former ruling Communist leaders transformed themselves into autocratic populists. Though undermined by a persistent economic crisis, the Russian Federation emerged nonetheless as a major regional power possessing a large nuclear arsenal and huge deposits of natural gas and oil threatening its smaller neighbours. A number of them joined NATO and EU, while Yugoslavia fell apart during the civil war and the armed intervention of NATO in which Russia was kept out. Even a so-called "preferred" relationship with Serbia had to be given up after the removal of Slobodan Milošević.

Only in Central Asia and the Caucasus Russia's influence could be largely preserved, but not in all countries. Economic relations played here a major role, especially with regard to the oil and natural gas resources and the pipeline systems. In the mean time the presence of American troops in Afghanistan led after 2001 to the establishment of a US bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional security body whose members included then China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan,

Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan pressed in 2005 the EU to remove its forces.

As long as Russia is confronted with armed conflicts at its southern border in the Caucasus a situation of permanent military mobilization persists and influence its foreign policy in general. In 1991-92 a war broke out between ethnic Georgians and Ossetians. South Ossetia remained under a de facto control of a Russian-backed government. A similar situation existed in Abkhazia after the War in Abkhazia (1992-93). In both cases this situation was not internationally legitimized. In 2008 a war between Georgia and Russia broke out in which Georgia was defeated. Russian forces remain stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia under bilateral agreements with the corresponding governments. Military interventions are, of course, examples of hard power used in highly unstable regions. The same applies to Ukraine where Russian interests are clashing with domestic and Western interest groups looking for military and economic control over its territories.

In order to supersede these antagonisms and with the obvious will to integrate most former Soviet republics in Russia's sphere of influence, Putin launched in October 2011 his Eurasian Economic Union. In the West this project was viewed as an attempt of recreating the former Russian empire and to prevent NATO's but also EU's eastward expansion. Inclusion of Russia into the globalization process was linked to Russia's natural gas and oil exports in combination with a modernization of the armed forces and an upgrading of its military potentials. Yet the situation in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and other hot points makes clear that hard power instruments are not sufficient for achieving Russia's strategic goals and have serious limitations.

### Russia's soft power

Against this backdrop, the role of the concept of "soft power" as a strategy in Russian foreign policy and the framing of its post-communist image



abroad seems of particular salience. After the fall of Communism, “soft power” in a world system with the US as the only real superpower became an instrument providing international cohesion and socialization by bringing under a single denominator the goals and the interests of all nations. In this “world community” international organizations and military alliances are still playing their proper role, but they recognize the leadership of the most powerful nations (G8/7, G20) when settling conflicts of interests or coordinating economic policies.

The concept of “soft power” was popularised by the Harvard Professor Joseph Nye Jr. in his book *Bound to Lead* in 1990 in which he pointed out that soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than through coercion. In addition, soft power could also be developed through alliances, economic and military assistance and cultural cooperation. This would then result in a more favourable public opinion and credibility abroad. Nye argued that soft power could not create global harmony without the help

of the other sources of powers and the international institutions.

Hence, “soft power” is different from “hard power” exercised by military interference or economic pressure. “Hard power” rests on the use of threats, on the “carrot-and-stick” method or “walking with a big stick”. However, the use of “hard power” rarely brings palpable results in international affairs. Influencing the behaviour of foreign powers can, in most cases, be obtained basically by using “soft methods”, by coordinating and setting up common actions. Nye pointed to the fact that the United States as the most powerful nation were influencing other nations to identify US interests as theirs. However, this did not prevent the United States from conducting long wars or military actions abroad and intervening directly and indirectly into domestic affairs of other nations. In this, US foreign policy was not that different from its Soviet counterpart. Intervening violently into domestic politics of other nations on behalf of the political, economic, military and cultural interest of all big powers

invalidates “soft power” that fails to obtain premeditated results.

“Soft power” is nowadays used within the context of cultural affairs in which Western standards and norms have gained predominance long before the end of the Cold War and the implosion of the Communist world system. One can notice that all countries and their leaders have adopted the Western (or American) way of life in presenting them to the outside world. McDonald’s, Coca Cola or Hollywood movies are the most recognizable icons of US world dominance. In world communication the CNN formula has set the standard for all its foreign competitors. Even the US style of government (with its “countervailing powers” and “checks and balances”) is believed as being superior to the British, French or German political system. According to Nye this is of primordial importance and relevant to the concept of “soft power”.

In the Gramscian sense “soft power” stand for “hegemony”. Though the US is too powerful to be effectively challenged by other militarily, it is not

powerful enough to achieve this alone, especially in a long-term perspective. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the US had to deal with a group of successor states of which the Russian Federation was militarily and economically the most powerful and could, in combination with rich reserves of hydrocarbons and other natural resources, incite Moscow to re-establish its political, military and economic pre-eminence in its “near abroad” and also challenge the much weaker independent states of Central Asia, South Caucasus and the Balkans and even the Baltic. Developing a “soft-power strategy” toward these countries, as well as Western Europe and North America, could be helpful to “soften” a more “hard-power” approach to military, financial and economic retaliation.

With the Russian Federation rapidly regaining economic and political stability after the financial crack down of 1998 and the rise to power by Putin, it was only natural that Moscow also normalised its relations with Western countries by setting up platforms for political dialogue and cultural cooperation while pursuing its economic and financial interests into the same direction: finding export markets for oil and natural gas. On the other hand, Moscow was interested in stabilising or expanding its influence in the former Soviet republics by imposing its control over oil and gas pipelines crossing their territories. With regard to Central Asia a “softer” strategy was followed by setting up security accords together with China as Asia’s most important economic power. The NordStream pipeline directly connecting the Russian gas fields with the German market by bypassing the countries of Central Europe (especially Poland). In the meantime, the projected SouthStream pipeline connecting the Central Asia natural gas fields with the Balkans and Italy, was accompanied by debates on Gazprom’s predominance in the European gas market. Financial flows from Russia to tax heavens and financial markets in Europe have not met resistance. Russian oligarchs could buy ailing football clubs, and Gazprom could become the European Champions



League’s main sponsor without meeting resistance. In the latter case a “soft” approach was paying.

The Kremlin rulers were convinced that pursuing a “soft” approach was necessary in order to overcome resistances to Russian influence originating from the Soviet period or even from the Tsarist era when Moscow was continually expanding to Western Europe and the Balkans. Moreover, the EU’s and NATO’s expansion to Central Europe, the Baltic and the Balkans had convinced the Kremlin rulers that “hard power”, especially through financial measures and gas deliveries, could keep in check the attempts of encircling Russia territorially and militarily. On the other hand, Russia needs its economic exchanges with Western Europe in order to sustain its welfare state and its military expenditures as well, which explains the Kremlin’s “stick-and-carrot” behaviour when facing political crises (Georgia, Ukraine) or threats of economic collapse (Belarus, Moldova) in its near abroad.

In the mean time, discussions about Russia’s corrupt and repressive political system in combination with the absence of the rule of law and the attempts of restoring absolute power of the head of the state created sympathy in the West for the Russian opposition movements and their leaders. Russia’s “soft power” funded by Russian officials, state organizations and Kremlin NGOs was largely unable to reverse this tendency, unfavourable to Putin’s attempts to “normalise” his relations

with the outside world. As a consequence, public opinion in Western Europe and the United States was still viewing Russia as a power operating on the margins of the European political system, and defending different and mostly unwanted moral and political values in its domestic and foreign policies.

However, appealing to a mutuality of interests, creating an attraction of shared values, and a willingness to consult each other before acting were difficult to achieve. This does, however, not mean that Russia is not looking for enhancing its “soft power”. “Soft power” means “success” and “prestige” in world politics. But it also requires openness, thus freedom of speech and increased foreign exchanges that can be regulated and organised by the Russian state and serve its strategies as well. The Winter Olympic Games of 2014 in Sochi were a good example of Putin’s attempts to attract the attention of the world by highlighting the performances of Russian athletes and to enhance the positive image of the country by trusting on the Western media willingly covering that kind of mass events. Russia spends millions of dollars on its television network Russia Today (RT), which illustrates perfectly the Kremlin’s strategy of influencing public opinion abroad. Since 2005 RT is broadcasting in English, but also in Arabic, Russian and Spanish worldwide via the cable, satellite, digital terrestrial television and Internet and reaches more than 640 million people in over 100 countries.

This “soft” approach to foreign policy is nonetheless based on Russia’s material interests dictated by its exporting industries and its largely non-competitive domestic industries and services. Forming a common market of all former Soviet Republics in Europe and Central Asia could relieve external economic and financial pressure as well. Hence, on 4 October 2011 Russia’s Prime Minister Putin (a candidate for the Presidency at that time) in an article in *Izvestia* laid out a plan of a Eurasian Union. This idea extended the proposals he advanced in Minsk on 12 May 2011 at a meeting of the Interstate Council of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) (grouping Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). In reference to the Customs Union already forged between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, Putin called for the creation of a Eurasian Economic Union. But, first of all, a Single Economic Space (SES) had to be established with unified legislation, free movement of capital, goods, services and labour force, and in future its economic policy in key spheres should also be coordinated under the EurAsEc. These ideas were further developed by Putin’s references to the EU four pillars. Not only goods, capital and labour would be able to move freely in the union but economic and monetary policy of its member states would be coordinated as well.

This was interpreted as a plan for a common market as a first step to re-integrating the former Soviet republics into a political confederation with a common economic and maybe also military bloc. The proposed Eurasian project could also be interpreted as a common market competing with the EU and that participation in the Eurasian Union would exclude any meaningful integration into Europe. In the meantime, Putin reminded to his sceptics that in 2003 the EU and Russia had already agreed to coordinate their respective rules of economic management and build a common economic space “from Lisbon to Vladivostok”. The Eurasian project also introduced the concept of “supranationality”. It

was clear that Putin’s proposals were targeting some countries like Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova looking for a closer integration into Europe, as well as Armenia. Moreover, Ukraine’s refusal would reduce the Eurasian Union to a Central Asian Union. Hence, the Kremlin started exercising pressure on Ukraine’s President Viktor Yanukovych (in office since February 2010) to enter into the trilateral Customs Union (of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan) and participate in the SES, which would create tensions between Russia and the EU having proposed an association agreement with Ukraine. Already in May 2011 President Medvedev for the first time had said that Ukrainian integration with Europe could hamper ties with Russia. From a “soft” approach the Kremlin would soon opt for a “harder” stance and provoke a popular revolt in Kiev ousting Yanukovych and creating a major conflict between Russia and the EU.

Yet of course we should not discard soft power as Russia’s foreign policy tool, even against the backdrop of the de-facto application of military force in Crimea. Rather one should engage in a critical debate on varieties of regime-specific interpretations of soft power. At least two major points betray the vulnerability of Putin’s understanding of soft power. First, it is used not for engineering new communicative spaces of shared norms, ideas and values, but rather for a top-down imposition of Russian worldviews and foreign policy principles on Russia’s neighbours, allies and partners. In this respect, soft power might correlate with Russian neo-imperial project. Secondly, Russia uses soft power not for the sake of fostering Europeanization and comprehensive modernization, but rather for voluntarily detaching itself from the group of democratic nations sharing common normative approaches to world politics. It is against this backdrop that the whole political pedigree of Russia’s soft power has to be assessed, with such cornerstone concepts as multi-polarity, sovereignty, spheres of influence, domestic and foreign policy conservatism, and the protection of Russian speakers.

The Russian government paid under Putin much attention to an upgrading of its soft power than under President Yeltsin. In order to influence public opinion abroad and the growing number of its westernizing citizens, the Russian authorities tried to keep up with the international media. Russia’s soft-power policy is, however, mainly developed by the Kremlin and its cronies in order to support governmental policies. Promotion of Russia as a “product” is mainly backed by creating cultural meetings, art exhibitions, sports mega-events, etc. Russian art galleries and museums are participating in international art circuits and exhibitions, but all these cultural manifestations remain in the periphery of the international cultural scene or large production centres. Russia’s cultural infrastructures are still undercapitalised and not fully linked to the globalizing cultural production centres situated in Los Angeles, New York, Paris, Berlin or even Shanghai and Mumbai. Russia’s soft-power export markets are situated in its near abroad, not in the West or in the rapidly westernising new economies in Asia.

Soft power is also based on the ability of attracting the attention of the citizens and enterprises in other countries. Apart from tourism, the ability of attracting foreign enterprises and institutions forms a key element in a country’s soft power. Openness to foreign cultures, languages and businesses is nowadays enforced by globalization and is leading to globalization and multiculturalism in combination with the appearance NGOs and new forms of participation to be tackled in this volume.

#### **Note:**

<sup>1</sup> This article is an introduction to a research project on Russian soft and hard power directed by a group of Russian political scientists.