

The Fate of Russian Soft Power following the 2014 Ukrainian Crisis

Introduction

Russia's military response to the unfolding events in Ukraine in 2014 were interpreted by some as the nail in the coffin of Moscow's pretensions to cultivate soft power. The recourse to hard power methods seemed akin to a removal of the velvet glove from the iron fist, revealing the traditional thrust of Russian foreign policy style that had been blurred into the background during the heyday of Moscow's work to burnish its image abroad in 2012/13. Indeed, the 2013 Euromaidan protests that preceded the unrest expressed a desire to 'return to Europe' that seemed to point to the utter failure of Russia's attempts to keep Ukraine in its cultural orbit.

However, research shows that there are reasons to consider that the Ukraine crisis, while a serious setback – not least due to the punitive economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation that Russia's actions incited in response – does not spell the death knell for Russian soft power work. The 2016 FPC retains the commitment to developing soft power that was first explicitly articulated in the 2013 rendition of that document. Furthermore, as Konstantin Kosachev, head of *Rosstrudnichestvo 2012-17*, one of the agencies charged with the task to nurturing soft power, declared in a 2015 article 'even when the guns are rattling, the battle for the minds does not stop'. There is a sense that measures to cultivate soft power are a normal part of the international activity of a great power such as Russia considers itself.

The success of Russia's ongoing work to cultivate soft power – that is to say, the ability to draw foreign citizens into its cultural and ideational worldview to serve foreign policy ends – is still subject to divergent evaluations. These range from often ungrounded assumptions about Russia's self-evident attraction, to those that reflexively despair at Russia's ability to even attract and co-opt the loyalty of its own citizens in the long-run, let alone the world beyond its borders. In contrast to these polarized, often emotionally driven assessments, this paper aims to assess the outlook for Russian soft power, post-Maidan, based on a fine-grain assessment of the specific problems Moscow faces with regard to generating cultural attraction and ideational influence. It proceeds from the assumption that while the use of hard power can pose tests for the credibility of soft power narratives, hard and soft power approaches are by no means mutually exclusive. Though close examination of the various aspects of Russian cultural and ideational promotion abroad it is intended to provide not simply a view on the status quo, but moreover a grounded assessment of the prospects for Russian cultural attraction in the coming years.

The issues identified by commentators in the Russian media cluster in eight areas: misunderstandings about the nature of soft power, the lack of something attractive to offer foreign citizens, a lack of faith in Russia to engage in international leadership, lack of the necessary infrastructure to communicate effectively with foreign audiences, a lack of financial support to such projects, the need for systematic approaches and strategic thinking to guide soft power work, the need for more expert knowledge about how to cultivate soft power among target audiences and the need to broaden international engagement away from an over-focus on elites.

The problems facing Russia's cultivation of soft power have been identified based on extensive reading of articles featured in Russian central newspapers accessed via the *Eastview* database citing the terms 'soft power' or '*myagkaya sila*' in 2000-2018. In these articles, the authors diagnose a range of different problems over the course of time. The task of this paper is to present and discuss these findings in the context of existing research. This constitutes an interim stage in the research project. The next stage consists of further in-depth research and interviews with experts with a view to analysing the extent to which the Russian authorities have sought to and succeeded in addressing the issues raised. It is hoped this conference will provide feedback and serve as a springboard to deepen the investigation of the problems identified. I would warmly welcome those reading and listening to this report with views and insights on the subjects covered to discuss further in an informal interview over coffee or lunch.

1. A brief background to Russian soft power

The concept of cultural and ideological influence is not new to Russia; the Soviet Union in its heyday was adept at promoting its worldview internationally and even in its declining years was active in the use of propaganda tools, albeit with ever less success. In the two decades that followed the decline and fall of the Soviet Union, the world changed dramatically in ways closely related to soft power. Due to globalisation, the widespread movement of people across borders and the proliferation of communication methods thanks to the internet, the old methods of informational influence are no longer viable, while the recourse to 'hard power' solutions to foreign policy problems has become more politically difficult and economically burdensome.

Already in June 2004, Putin had encouraged diplomats to work on Russia's image. In December 2004, Fyodor Lukyanov noted how foreign soft power work prepares the ground for soft revolutions and that Moscow should learn from that 'Ukraine crisis' (Lukyanov 2004). The establishment of the Department for Interregional and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and the CIS within the Presidential Administration is indicative of support at the highest level and may be interpreted as a signal that this message had been received by the Kremlin (Frolov 2005; Mereu 2005). While RT (or Russia Today as it was then known) was created in 2005, 2006 saw the hiring of PR company Ketchum to handle Russia's image in the run-up to the G8 presidency, and the following year witnessed the establishment of the Russkiy Mir Foundation. Despite the implementation of these and other early measures, 2008 seems to have been the turning point in Russian engagement with soft power. While 'undoubtedly the "colour revolutions" to a large degree woke up the Russian political class, demonstrating to them the enormous meaning of ideology and culture in modern global

politics' (Kazin 2008), this awakening seems to have been a gradual process. From around 2008 the soft power concept gained wider public salience and became increasingly entrenched in Russian diplomatic and scientific-political circles (Budaev 2008; Karavaev 2008; Burlinova 2013) and heated debates on the concept commenced (Ageyeva 2017). Indeed, in October 2008, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (2008) for the first time publicly noted the importance of "soft power", defining it as 'the ability to act in the world with the aid of one's civilisational, humanitarian-cultural, foreign policy and other attraction'. Although policy documents had previously engaged with issues related to language, culture and diaspora affairs (for instance, the 'Principle Directions of the Russian Federation Policy in the Field of International Cultural and Humanitarian Co-Operation supplementary to the foreign policy concept' adopted in 2010 and successive Federal Targeted Programmes for the Russian Language), the phrase 'soft power' was not officially embodied in Russian foreign policy until 2013, when it was mentioned for the first time in Article 20 of the Foreign Policy Concept 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,[which] is becoming an indispensable component of modern international relations.¹

Despite the assertions of some Western experts that 'Russia does not get' soft power (Nye 2013), it is clear that at least certain members of diplomatic, political and analytical communities in Russia *do* understand in principle the importance of soft power in contemporary international politics. A number of prominent Russian scholars and political analysts discuss the concept (Fominykh 2010; Karaganov 2010; Kazantsev and Merkushev 2008). For some, this is cast in doubt, however, by the apparently 'careless' (Tsygankov 2013) attitude Russia has had to its international image; not shying away from the unsanctioned exercise of hard power beyond its borders. Yet this should not be seen as cause to dismiss Russian soft power work in its entirety, as it is the essence of 'smart power' that it effectively combines, rather than excludes, the use of hard power with soft power.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that acceptance of these arguments is not universal. Individuals with a 'force agencies' [*silovik*] background play a significant role in Russian policy making (Strokan and Taylor 2018), and it is perhaps human nature that those with a military background are inclined to perceive military solutions to foreign policy problems, viewing soft power superficially as 'a velvet glove on an iron fist'. Yet the fact that the Russian Ministry of Defence has reportedly engaged with the concept of soft power – albeit in terms of defending against a foreign threat – does suggest that the potency of ideology, culture and values is taken seriously in the hard power ministries. However, there have been certain conceptual misconceptions, which will be addressed in the next section.

2. Conceptual confusion

¹ http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186 (accessed 21st April 2019)

'Soft power' – like the unprefix concept of power itself – is one of International Relation's proverbial contested concepts. Divergences in usage, and the assumptions behind the ways the concept is invoked mean that commentators may find themselves talking at cross purposes.

Part of this problem in the Russian case originates on a cultural-linguistic level. Soft power is most commonly translated as '*myagkaya sila*', perhaps since this is the rendering used in the Russian translation of Nye's 2004 book of that name. However, the Russian notion of '*sila*' is narrower, with more emphasis on coercion than the English 'power', which is broad enough to encompass a wider spectrum of influence. Thus, '*myagkaya sila*' is at the outset a confusing contradiction. Other less frequently used translations include '*myagkaya vlast*', '*myagkaya moshch*' and '*gibkaya vlast*' '*vliyanie*', which are perhaps closer to the flexible ways of working associated with soft power (Lebedeva 2016). Meanwhile, 'humanitarian cooperation' is the most widely used term for invoking the *methods* of cross-border cultural, social, scientific, linguistic and educational interaction. Furthermore, the fact of 'soft power' being an import from the West has meant that some engaging with the topic are reported as being 'sickened by the clear borrowing of an Anglicism' (Fominykh 2008), with the concept evoking the sense of an underhand, low manner of smiling and talking nicely of values as a friend, while all the time playing off weaknesses to serve one's own ends (Yefremenko 2010). In parallel, there has existed a sense of soft power as the 'feminine' and apparently peripheral socio-cultural and psychological aspects of international relations, with the masculine 'hard' power constituting the serious business of politics (Fominykh 2008).

Such issues of linguistic confusion are indicative of another problem associated with Russian soft power endeavours, namely its equation with "propaganda." Soft power has been seen in Russia simply as a case of 'old wine in new bottles', with one interviewee in 2011 stating confidently that 'we know what [soft power] is, it's propaganda'. Indeed, in the early years of the discussion on improving Russia's image abroad, lines were drawn between those who stressed the need to implement a better PR strategy and those emphasising the crucial need to improve domestic realities as the means to improve international perceptions (Semenenko 2008), reflected in the distinction in the terms '*imidzh*' (public image, brand, spin) and '*obraz*' (image, representation, reflection). As Kazin (2008) noted, 'The main problem is the sharp contrast between the splendid corporate-bureaucratic PR and real life'. In more recent years, senior officials have sought to underscore the distinction between propaganda, with its emphasis on misleading, biased information, and soft power. Konstantin Kosachev, Head of Rossotrudnichestvo in 2012-2017, noted,

It is wrong to compare what Russia does in the field of soft power with Soviet propaganda. [...] It would be both futile and foolish for us to do so in the context of an open and globalised world. We do not intend to project a fictitious image of the country, but would like to present well what Russia is in reality. (Moscow grapples with series of PR disasters)²

Good intentions are an important starting point, but naturally need not only effective implementation, but moreover, substance, in terms of an attractive reality.

² Konstantin Kosachev, cited in 'Kremlin Grapples With Series of PR Disasters', *The Moscow Times*.

3. The need for an attractive development model and worldview

A key problem facing the development of Russian soft power, has been identified as the absence of something attractive to offer the world. This issue has two interrelated aspects. The first relates to the need to offer a viable model of socio-economic and political development that meets a population's needs and, no less importantly, their expectations. The second is less tangible and concerns a leading polity's worldview and value system, which should offer a somewhat distinctive perspective on world affairs and provide a legitimating narrative framework for policy actions. To garner attraction, this latter should 'make sense' under contemporary conditions.

The matter of the lack of an appealing model of development concerns the ability to provide for the population's needs with regard to education, healthcare, security, housing, entertainment in such a way that foreigners admire and aspire to emulate them. As such, it concerns physical infrastructure and resourcing, which arguably concerns 'hard' economic power. The problem in this regard has been summed up by the note that 'nobody wants to live like in Russia' (Kommersant 2006). It is difficult to attract partners to join integration projects when the standard and style of living exemplified by the would-be leader seems unappealing relative to other geopolitical blocs.

In addition to the foreign policy ramifications, this issue is first and foremost a problem of domestic legitimacy and national cohesion. Unless Russia shores up its domestic front, it is deemed vulnerable to the soft power overtures of Western and potentially other polities. Political leaders have found it expedient in public to blame Western conspiracies and the machinations of their secret services agencies for colour revolutions. Yet policy statements suggest some recognition of objective socio-economic deficiencies that might render populations vulnerable to foreign charm offensives that might stoke a crisis sentiment and protest potential among their citizens, especially if given moral and / or practical support from overseas. For instance, Vladimir Putin's address to the Federal Assembly in 2019 foregrounded issues of social wellbeing of the population and called urgently for measures to address problems with the provision of health care, housing, support to families.³ Western sanctions, which have resulted in a drop in GDP and other economic indicators, compounded by relatively low oil prices and lack of meaningful progress in diversifying the Russian economy away from hydrocarbons, have the potential to impede the ability to make progress in this area.

Domestic socio-economic progress not only undergirds national unity, stability and resilience, it also makes Russia more competitive on the marketplace of international human capital. The prospect of an attractive lifestyle and career opportunities not only stems 'brain drain', but is also a factor in 'brain gain'; the attraction of talented and skilled professionals to Russia to help power development in future-oriented fields of science and technology. A related issue to be addressed concerns the negative impact upon the ability to attract foreign talent to Russia emanating from a fear of racism and xenophobia (Fominykh 2008).

³ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59863>

Another aspect of decline and degradation related to international attraction in post-Soviet Russia has been that of Russia's cultural industry. Despite Russian high culture – ballet, literature, musicians, composers and artists – constituting an important positive element of self-identity and national positioning on the global arena, funding cuts and lack of strategy in the post-Soviet period lead to a sense that attraction even in this area, where Russia had felt some kind of superiority over the West, had become residual; relying on the inertia of prior achievements and investments.

When it comes to soft power *par excellence*, Western approaches often associate the concept with “people’s diplomacy”. This concerns the way in which, in communicating with citizens of foreign countries, individuals speak apparently spontaneously and with some pride about the virtues of their own country and the opportunities it affords them. This kind of national PR works on a voluntary and personal basis and as such is authentic and credible to audiences particularly insofar as it often dovetails with depictions in the media and official public diplomacy. Yet Kazantsev and Merkushev (2008), who lead one of the earliest in-depth studies into Russian soft power potential, attribute the prevalence of negative stereotypes about Russia abroad in part to the negative self-evaluations of Russians themselves. Silayev (2014) remarks in a similar vein that ‘Russians are not inclined to hide their vices from outsiders’, which has significant implications when one tries to build a good reputation. The first step in recruiting Russians as “people’s diplomats” would be to foster a sense of optimism among the population. Unfortunately, in recent years, particularly in wake of the Ukraine crisis and the isolation that ensued, pessimism has been reported at the prevailing national emotion.⁴

This section has highlighted the particularly intimate relationship between foreign and domestic policy when it comes to soft power. It highlights the inevitable inadequacy of any strategy of attraction that seeks to rely on PR rather than a core composed of something genuinely interesting and worthwhile. This seems to be recognized by expert; as head of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy Sergei Karaganov put it, ‘the main reserves for Russia’s foreign policy and its influence in the next decade lie more than ever in internal development’ (Karaganov 2013).

4. Lack of faith in Russia

The prevailing mood of pessimism about the future of Russia reported by a number of commentators (Karaganov 2013; Inozemtsev 2019) has also been expressed as a ‘sense of Russia having exhausted its potential’ (Okara 2007). On this question of national self-doubt, Vladislav Surlov remarked already in 2006 that,

It is said that “Russia has become worn out: the prolonged imperial strain sapped her strength, she lost her vitality and has left the stage of history. Russia is disintegrating;

⁴ ‘Vladislav Inozemtsev, ‘Pessimism sweeps Russia’, The Moscow Times, 15 January 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/01/15/pessimism-sweeps-russia-op-ed-a64144> (accessed 21st April 2019)

the Far East is becoming depopulated, the Caucasus is embittered. Russia has fallen behind forever; a raw backwater, a country of slaves and masters and eternal poverty, making ends meet with bread for kvass and tree stumps for gas. Russia is physically dying out; a lethal outcome of population loss is inevitable..."

This lack of drive and belief in Russia, and a lack of readiness to build a new leading future is attributed to ubiquitous corruption and the wish of the population and the elite to "relax" from the burden of communism and the ensuing revolution (Karaganov 2012, Kurginyan 2007). Analysts point to a prevailing attitude of nihilism, a 'culture of blasphemy, [where] all criteria of ethics and political correctness have gotten lost' (Gromov and Pavlovskiy 2005). Kazin (2008) concludes that 'All this testifies to the fact that the moral condition of our elite is such that it is hardly in a fit state to nurture the nation, to form a positive value orientation and lead the nation.'

This crisis of confidence manifests in the widespread appropriation of state funds for personal use by civil servants, and the fact that many who have the resources to do so – those whom Surkov terms the 'off-shore aristocracy' – take their money and family outside of Russia, demonstrating a lack of faith in their country to provide for them and hence the need to take matters into their own hands (Karaganov 2013; 2012). Meanwhile, liberals, for whom, in Surkov's words, the 'sun rises in the West' engage in sharp criticism, which has not been well-received by the Kremlin. The former 'grey cardinal' has framed the issue almost in terms of a kind of spiritual crisis,

In fact any shrieks suggesting impossibility, immobility, non-participation, non-existence always suffice on the day as a test of durability. Among the causes of decadence, the truest are those such as laziness, indifference, ignorance and weakness. (2006)

This critical diagnosis is of great import for soft power since the visions of the future, around which some level of consensus seems to have coalesced, proceed from the assumption that in order to be itself, Russia must be strong.⁵ The meaning here is twofold: on one hand, realizing the self-identity and expectations of the population relies upon Russia being a strong power, on the other hand, failure to be a strong state, to give in to desovereignising pressures, will doom the state to disintegration and ceasing to exist as such. Surkov (2006) is not alone in reminding his readers of the ancient principle 'he who believes, rules; those who do not lose faith in themselves will become the ruling people'.

Although one hears less mention of the term "sovereign democracy" these days, its key principles have become common sense in Russian politics. In order to realise the sovereign democratic project, Surkov wrote in 2006 of the need to 'unite the elite' and render it "nationally oriented", rather than exclusively self-oriented. To this end, he appealed to pride in Russian history and, linking into the sense of the history of Russian statehood, leant on the rhetorical trump card of the older generation who fought and sacrificed so much for Russia, noting 'the people have not endowed the current generation with the right to end their history'. In a similar vein, Kurginyan (2007) noted, 'yes it's a heavy cross, this super

⁵ Vladimir Putin, Address to the Federal Assembly 2005, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>

power life. But do we prefer the sweet death in the embrace of uncomplicated comforts, or the genuine hero of our pantheistic times.'

Although Malinova (2014) notes autumn 2012 as the time when the campaign to 'nationalize' the Russian elite was launched, given the above, this must be seen as the result of a longer process, one that began already at least five years previously. Judging by the media commentaries, this issue is still not fully resolved.

5. Absence of infrastructure

In the early days of the public discussion of soft power in the Russian media, one of the key problems highlighted was the lack of infrastructure, this having become severely degraded due to the decline of financial and organizational capacity following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the context of soft power, infrastructure essentially refers to communicative capacity; the ability to communicate with audiences by means of the wider range of channels, from the media, to educational institutions, from public diplomacy outlets, to individuals speaking on their own account or in concert with others. Numerous articles appeared (when) proclaiming the need for a range of bodies to address the dearth of Russian cultural influence abroad (Fominykh 2010; Filimonov 2010; Rogozin 2010; Bespalov 2011). This need to develop the cultural and ideational tools of international political leverage gained recognition on the highest-levels, as already established. This was reflected in the establishment of a number of high-profile bodies, as detailed in the table below.

Year of foundation	Official bodies
1994(?)	Government Commission for the Affairs of Compatriots Abroad
2005	Department for Interregional and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and the CIS, under the Presidential Administration
2006	Interstate Foundation of Humanitarian Cooperation in the CIS, headed by the chair of the Council on Humanitarian Cooperation of the CIS states
2008	Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudichestvo) under the MFA
2012	Russian Public Council for International Cooperation and Public Diplomacy within the Civic Chamber
Media outlets	
2004-12	Russia Profile (published by RIA Novosti)
2005	RT channel
2007	Russia Beyond the Headlines (published by Rossiiskaya Gazeta)
2013	Rossiia Segodnya (formerly RIA Novosti)
2013	Russia Direct
2014	Sputnik news agency (formerly the Voice of Russia and RIA Novosti)
Public-facing organisations	
2007	Russkiy Mir Foundation

2009	House of Russia Abroad Foundation named after Alexander Solzhenitsin
2010	Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Foundation
2013	Foundation of St Andrew the First-Called

High-level (elite / expert) forums

2004	Valdai Discussion Club
2007	Institute of Democracy and Cooperation (Paris)
2010	Russian Council for International Affairs think tank

Although the table above is no exhaustive, it details some of the most prominent organisations, which in many cases are active across different countries, either through local branches or by involving people of a range of nationalities. Although presence is not indicative of effectiveness, the existence of these bodies indicate that there has been a push to create the kinds of programmes and structures deemed necessary to develop soft power. Whether these nodes are sufficient, appropriate and effective to addressing a particular target audience in a given country, however, remains an issue to be judged on a case-by-case basis. It is likely that each case country would need many more carefully targeted and lower profile initiatives to create a network of information transmission to have a chance of exercising consistent influence.

6. Funding shortfalls

Numerous commentators point to the lack of funds available for soft power work (Karaganov and Petrovskaya Dec 2004; Lukyanov Dec 2004; Babich 2004; Frolov 2005; Karavaev 2008; Lavrov 2012). For instance, Babich (2004) noted that Russia only gives 1-2 roubles per year per compatriot. Frolov (2005) pointed to the need to 'start serious fundraising to fund schools and universities, to subsidise TV channels, and to donate satellite kits' in order that compatriots might receive Russian programming.

Of course, funding to such initiatives is only part of the financial backing required to succeed in the soft power stakes. There is also a lot of work behind the scenes required (ideational development, market research, analysis) that doesn't strictly constitute 'soft power activity' but is a necessary prelude to it. Furthermore, it is hard to track funding in this area as such activity does not fall conveniently under a single budget heading of an individual outlet, and in any case, not all information seems to be publicly available.

In order to glean insight into this topic, it will likely be necessary to examine press coverage to retrieve published budget figures for the most significant organisations, projects and policy areas at a number of points in time to observe the trend.

Although research is still ongoing in this area, as an example, one could examine the budgets of the following:

- Russkiy Mir Foundation
- Rossotrudnichestvo

- Gorchakov Foundation
- Cultural budget
- Funds allocated for the promotion of the Russian language abroad
- Scholarships for foreign students to study in Russia

Examination of the budgetary potential of Russian soft power outlets should give an indication of the importance attributed to this area of activity as well as providing insight into Russia's potential in this area over the course of time.

An issue that may affect the interpretation of these results, however, is the matter of corruption, which has been reported as being particularly prevalent in this sector, even by Russia's uninspiring performance on this metric (Bespalov 2011; Nechepurenko 2015; Karaganov 2010; Karavaev 2008; Fominykh 2008; Karaganov and Petrovskaya December 2004).

Aware of this issue, attempts are being made to strengthen accounting practices in order to address the problem. It remains to be seen how effective such measures will prove.

In any case, it is worth bearing in mind that even an exceptionally well-financed soft power campaign is unlikely to succeed in co-opting audiences if the other issues highlighted in this paper remain unaddressed. While roubles spent may serve as a convenient proxy indicator, and investment is certainly crucial to create opportunities in this sector, the fostering of soft power ultimately depends of how audience members receive the narratives disseminated. Glossy PR campaigns and slick strategic communications rolled out at great expense will not succeed in co-opting audiences if they generate cynicism, incredulity and indifference.

7. The imperative to systemise efforts

Another frequently highlighted problem concerns the unsystemised nature of Russian soft power work, which is reflected specifically in a lack of strategic thinking on this matter and a lack of coordination between relevant agencies.

Russian commentators diagnose a lack of strategy in this policy area (Kononenko 2006, Lavrov 2012; Tchernega 2015). This problem in turn emanates from a fundamental issue that dogged post-Soviet Russia, namely the lack of a clear and widely accepted concept of the national interest. Without a shared vision of what the country should become, notions of long-term strategic planning to achieve an objective become irrelevant. It is not possible to devise a concept of priorities without an inspiring and more or less broadly accepted idea of the fundamental nature of the country and the direction in which it should be headed. As Alexander Ivanov (2007) remarked, 'Strategy, strategic prognoses and strategic planning flow from ideology' and he went as far as to state that 'today ideological tasks are more important than socio-economic ones' in Russia, since without a 'reliable ideological basis, without which all current achievements of our country will not get long development, and will turn out useless and pointless'. After the collapse of the USSR, the nascent state was riven by disputes about what kind of country Russia should become. In the absence of a critical mass of consent to a particular common national vision among the elites, there was a tendency towards individualistic thinking and action across the board.

As a result of the absence of long-term, institutionalized strategic thinking, Russian foreign policy actors tended to have recourse to short-term, tactical actions that have often proved 'counterproductively clumsy' (Galeotti 2015) and lead on occasion to 'spectacular miscalculation of the variables' (Karaganov and Petrovskaya December 2004). For instance, in its response to the Magnitsky Act, the Kremlin lashed out emotionally, banning the adoption of Russian children by Americans ostensibly but spuriously on the grounds of safety concerns. Without any advantage even to itself, the Russian government moreover hurt the children awaiting adoption, seemingly contradicting its nascent discourse on family values and damaging its image (Tsygankov 2013). Emotional responses are more likely to occur if foreign policy making is not institutionalized, procedure-driven and evaluable against criteria relating to strategic interest.

Once strategic goals have been decided upon, it is necessary to implement coordinated actions in order to realise them. Coordination among the agencies tasked with soft power work is, however, another area flagged as problematic by Russian commentators (Ivanov 2011; Bespalov 2011; Tchernega 2015).⁶ Filimonov wrote in 2010 that,

the state needs a structure that would coordinate all areas of public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, foreign cultural policy and advocacy, and also assume responsibility for training personnel and participate in shaping foreign policy.

Such as public authority does not exist in Russia. Thus there is no mechanism for the interdepartmental (inter-corporate) coordination of efforts in this sphere. Russia's public diplomacy is governed at the level of the top national leadership through the press service and foreign policy offices of the presidential staff and the Russian government staff. Alongside its tangible strengths, this structure has an obvious drawback: the whole organisation is strictly vertical, which greatly hinders grassroots initiative.

Creating a structure in Russia similar to the very bright example from US history (USAI, which existed 1953-1999) might preserve the current involvement of the top leadership in public diplomacy and at the same time maintain a more effective feedback loop with non-governmental sources of information. Furthermore, such an office might take part in training personnel for Russian public diplomacy because the country has no professionals in this field. This is one of the significant "blank spots" in the system of forming Russia's own soft power potential.

The top-down approach to soft power mentioned above has meant that the Presidential Administration has dealt with individual soft power agencies on a vertical, one-to-one level, without horizontal channels of communication to facilitate inter-agency coordination. The relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russkiy Mir Foundation was noted as an exception to this (interview 2011). Since this time, Sapryka, Vavilov and Pastyuk (2017) suggest that a coordination of activity has occurred, which seems to be backed up by the comments of Petrovskiy (2013) and Lukin (2013).

⁶ <http://archive.government.ru/eng/stens/20531/>

Strengthening coordination in the implementation of work aiming to nurture soft power should help overcome 'bureaucratic obstacles' (Karavaev 2008), and the situation whereby '[d]ifferent state agencies and civil society sectors have different interests and motivations, and [...] seek to turn their vision of the problem into the main driving force of official policy' (Zevelev 2008), which has sometimes resulted in the incidence of 'weird zigzags in the policy course' (Kagarlitskiy 2012).

It is possible, indeed likely, that improvements have been made on this front. Further research is required to confirm and elaborate upon such development, however.

Turning to the implementation side of the matter, one of the gravest problems associated with Russian endeavours to cultivate soft power is that practitioners have sometimes 'performed' public diplomacy, rather than engaging in it properly. Measures have been implemented, but without genuine consideration of their impact or even their desired impact on the target audience. Yevgeny A. Primakov (2018), for instance, has expressed frustration with the way in which,

Russia spent and spends significant sums on international humanitarian projects. How effectively these funds are spent in another matter. In my view, under some conditions in Kabul it is much more useful to do programmes to purify water than to put up statues of AS Pushkin. But we like generally to put up memorials and hold round tables.

This approach is perhaps a result of the top-down approach to cultural relations whereby those on the ground feel compelled to show some tangible activity in the form of measures enacted. Such results may be more about gratifying superiors by supplying ready 'evidence' to support comfortable (though increasingly inaccurate) assumptions about Russia's primacy and attraction to residents of the neighbouring countries, or convincing superiors about the efficiency of their own work (Snegovaya 2015) Instead, Primakov suggests 'we avoid empty symbolist programmes and concentrate on projects that are targeted at improving the quality of life of people in conflict zones (2018). Such humanitarian projects have perhaps less instant appeal as they would not necessarily yield immediate benefits to the donor party, although seen from a long-term, strategic perspective, this could be a more effective way of cultivating attraction, as is accepted by many countries' international aid agencies.

Primakov (2018) gives another example of how Russian soft power work may be conducted without really thinking how a given action might advance strategic goals and how it might interact with other parallel or future initiatives. Articulating his view on the Russian approach to soft power he observed:

Primakov: When we start restoring our former know how, it follow a formal path. We need to show soft power? Let's organise a conference on 'Peace for the World'. And definitely with coffee breaks and a buffet.

Interviewer: Are you alluding to any concrete Russian structure in particular?

P: No, I speak about our common sickness. Conferences and round tables are also necessary, talking is important. But this cannot be the only content of 'soft power'.

‘Soft power’ works where and then when it elicits appreciation, sympathy and solidarity. If this isn’t present, it hasn’t worked. People drink coffee and leave.

People may be enticed to attend ‘soft power’ events with the prospect of complimentary refreshments, or on a ‘voluntary-coerced’ basis (Hudson 2014, 2015) but unless thought is given to how to actively engage participants, on the level of both their thoughts and actions, then the experience will remain a passive one; a wasted opportunity and an unproductive investment. The author attended one such event in 2009, namely the youth section of the St Petersburg Economic Forum. No expense was spared to provide an impressive experience in terms of a high quality venue, glossy conference materials and delicious refreshments, and to secure the involvement of high-level individuals (e.g. Arkady Dvorkovich, Vyacheslav Nikonov). Yet even the working-group facilitators themselves seemed hesitant and uncertain of the point of our exercises. No efforts were made on the part of the organisers to help build ongoing networks among the participants, who as “young leaders” might be presumed to have an interest in Russia that could potentially have yielded future benefits to the country. Stronger coordination and strategic thinking behind soft power work, as recommended by numerous analysts would help avoid the situation where there are ‘reports about “bold initiatives” [which] are still all the rage – but after making a splash in the media for a week or two, [...] dissolve into oblivion’ (Kostikov 2014).

Primakov is clear of the need for a systematic approach to soft power work, stressing ‘it is necessary to evaluate the demands and do what is necessary and [...] and after evaluate effectiveness’ (Primakov 2018). Dolinsky shares the view on the need to ‘develop evaluation criteria to assess the effectiveness of activity in this field’ (Dolinsky 2013, cited in Lebedeva 2015). In 2011, my fieldwork suggested that evaluation related primary to accounting issues; it is hoped follow up interviews will provide insight into progress in this regard.

8. Studying, learning and training

Contemporary public diplomacy and soft power work is relatively new to Russia, and therefore a significant learning curve may be assumed. Such learning has two main aspects, concerning both the question of *how* to engage effectively in public diplomacy, and related to that, the no less important matter of understanding the target audience in the countries of interest.

With regard to the issue of how to conduct effective public diplomacy, a number of authoritative analysts and practitioners recognize the purposefulness of Russia learning from the experience of others (Primakov 2018; Velikaya 2016; Pellicciari 2017; Rogozin 2010; Lavrov 2012; Babich 2004; Baranovskiy and Kvashnin 2016). As Primakov (2018) quipped, ‘it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel’. Nevertheless, one might discern some tacit signs of resistance to studying Western approaches, which apparently caused Dmitri Rogozin to stress in an article aimed at members of civil society, public diplomacy professionals and international information experts that,

The technologies of soft power accumulated by the West and their rich practical instrumentalisation and theoretical comprehension must be attentively studied and

adopted to Russia. What's there to be ashamed of? Peter I called Karl XII his greatest teacher and in the end beat him at Poltava' (Rogozin 2010b)

This reference to King Charles XII of Sweden (1682-1718), who was known as a skilled military leader and tactician, emphasizes the theme of Russia needing to work today to consolidate its position, without excessive and unwarranted shows of pride, in order to reap the benefits of genuine achievement in the future.

In terms of the specifics of the agenda of study, analysts and practitioners put forward a number of recommendations. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, suggested 'Russia should closely study the successful experience of other countries in building a positive image' (Lavrov 2012). In a more in-depth recommendation, Rogozin underscored that,

We need a research centre to charge with the tasks of analysing the accumulated Western experience, tracking all information campaigns touching upon the interests of Russian, and preparing expert conclusions and lists of practical measures to anticipate, counteract, and overcome the consequences of propaganda attacks on our country. (Rogozin 2010)

In this analysis, not only should Western theory and practice be studied, but, presumably drawing on this accumulated knowledge, Russia should be prepared to respond to informational moves of contenders. This would clearly be a part of a more strategic, systematic approach to foreign policy.

Studies of soft power appear to cluster in particular research centres in Moscow, for instance the MGIMO Institute for International Studies and the Institute of World Economy and IR (IMEMO) of the Russian Academy of Science. Publications with an international focus, for example *Russia in Global Affairs*, *Mezhdunarodnye protsessy*, *Mirovaia ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia* (the monthly journal founded by RAS and IMEMO), *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'* and the Moscow Times have been particularly popular outlets for publications on this topic.

Turning to the matter of the audience, Tatyana Stanovaya of the Center for Political Technologies points out that 'the reason Russia's soft power policy has failed is because it unwaveringly pushes against the tide of popular sentiment' (cited in Nechepurenko 2015). Instead, analysts point to the need for Russia to 'think not about what we can offer them, but what they expect from us;' (Karavaev 2012) attuning its ideational offerings to values identified as being in highest demand today based on thorough analysis (Agaeva 2017). This would entail sociological research 'targeted at uncovering the requirements of foreign audiences [...] to know the profile of the people who are the potential receivers of information' (Velikaya 2016).

Without such capacity to gather in-depth insights into the situation in countries of interest, continuing this 'policy of negative ignorance' as in Georgia (Karaganov and Petrovskaya December 2004), Russia is liable to keep making same mistakes. For instance, ignoring unwelcome trends, such as the 'anti-Russian policy [that] prevailed in the Ukrainian education system' (Tchernega 2015) or failing to probe more deeply in countries of Central Asia, where 'many people go [...] and get a warm welcome, but few are able to form

accurate impressions' (Grozin in Goryaynova 2011). Indeed, with regard to the overthrow of the ostensibly pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych, Tchernega (2015) summarized the problem,

Events in Ukraine have confirmed that Russian foreign policy suffers from a lack of strategic vision and proactive strategies. [...] Russia focused its efforts on the Ukrainian elites, or rather those billionaires who showed interest in cooperation. This certainly needed to be done given the oligarchic system that existed in Ukraine. But Russia overlooked the fact that Ukrainian tycoons feared Russian dominance. Their political preferences constantly changed, depending on the situation at a given moment, especially on the balance of power with other oligarchic clans. Russia obviously missed the moment when almost all of them united against Victor Yanukovych clan that had risen to high.

Russia's main mistake, however, is that its Ukraine policy overlooked Ukrainian society, including its historical specifics and evolution since 1991. In fact, as Russian experts rightly note, a unified nation has not yet formed in Ukraine. Even though there are obvious differences in culture and mindset in the eastern and western parts of the country, Ukraine has a "core" (primarily its central and southern regions) where, despite its general closeness with Russia, features can be identified that comprise a Ukrainian identity.

Okara (2007) likewise expands upon this theme

Quite a few Russians consider Ukraine to be a coincidental, mechanical aggregated of regions lacking a motivation to be unified, that just came together thanks to Russians. [...] Regardless of the truth or otherwise of such views, the fact remains that in Ukraine such views contradict its own post-Soviet nation-building narrative and are perceived as offensive manifestations of chauvinism and grounds to view Russia as a threat; articulations of the same polarize the environment and turn the youth, who grew up in independent Ukraine and already become the nation's leaders, against Russia.

Further, Okara points to a problem that also emerged frequently in focus groups with students from across Ukraine in 2011 (Hudson 2014; 2015), namely that Russia or its representatives have sometimes handled themselves in an arrogant, chauvinistic way towards Ukraine, and indeed other countries in the region. In a particularly patronising comment in *Argumenty i Fakty*, Alksnic (cited in Tseplyaev 2009), who also compares CIS countries to girls 'who eat but don't dance', asserts crudely that,

At the moment the stick is more necessary than the gingerbread. Like spoiled children they don't listen and act up. It's time to put one in the corner and to leave the other without compot... And if they run out the house, so much the worse for them.

While such statements are by no means reflective of the whole, media outlets hostile to Russian involvement in Ukraine can easily pick up upon such comments and use them as part of a narrative depicting Russian influence as inimical to Ukrainian nationhood. Such

attitudes are seen to stem from the assumption on the part of some that the 'countries of Central Asia will always exist in political or economic dependence on Russia' (Fominykh 2010) and that 'our political class has got used to relating to the CIS as a provincial backwater', which is 'not going anyway from Moscow' (Solozobov 2008). In a time of heightened competition for influence in the post-Soviet region, taking allegiance for granted seems highly risky, and to count on it while tacitly condoning the expression of such contemptuous statements, rather feckless.

Proceeding in this way seems even more doomed to failure given that Russia's narratives in some cases specifically contradict Ukrainian (and others') self-understandings. The weakness of Russian research / intelligence gathering in this regard (or perhaps resistance to hearing such messages) meant that Moscow continued to assume the salience of out-dated narratives that were perceived as increasingly dissonant and even offensive. In the absence of a more carefully curated discourse that reflects also the interests of local populations, Russian soft power work has often been perceived as attempts to 'foist a particular point of view' (Bespalov 2011). Thus, as Mark Galeotti put it, 'the Kremlin may have a megaphone, but when its message is laughable or offensive, that simply means it can alienate more people at once.' (Galeotti 2015)

Instead, Okara highlights the need for

a positive programme of development of the image of Russia in Ukraine and in the other CIS countries [which] should be built on the priorities of 'gibkoi vlast' and proceed from respectful and mindful relations with those countries, peoples and national cultures. The main Russian "message" should be built not on national egoism, but on the search for common goals, shared interests and "common fate". Only a new super-national project based on universal identity can be effective. Old technologies of "direct influence", based on pressure and intimidation have become not simply ineffective, but suicidal. (Okara 2007)

Fedorova (2014) concurs, asserting that,

The quieter we speak, the greater the chances that precisely the content of our words, and not a rough form of them, will be audible. Words have power. And if our words have power, well, it will actually be soft power, and not destructive.

On this front there seems to have been some progress in terms of awareness of this issue, with Foreign Minister Lavrov (2012) counselling that,

An overwhelming influence of alien soft power can cause resentment in intellectuals to no less extent than hard power. The most effective ideas are those that agree with the concepts and interests of civil society of other countries, when they do not dismantle national tradition and are useful and clear to everyone. Soft power is the ability to not only promote one's values but also to respect others'; the ability to co-exist with others without assimilating them, and create conditions for their development and preserving their culture and language. Of crucial importance is participation in producing public benefits, readiness to bring good to the whole

community and realize one's interests through common institutions and mechanism, making sure that these interests can benefit others too. (Lavrov 2012)

Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, has also made statements in a similar vein, pointing to the need to 'learn to respect the sovereignty of those countries that to a greater or lesser extent belong to the Russian World. [Stressing] that we must rid ourselves of the "big brother" complex, that we should by no means impose anything on others, and that there must be relations of partnership and respect' (cited in Miller 2017). Furthermore, Vladimir Putin has likewise pointed to the issue of respectful conduct and attitude towards people in a number of statements (Federal Address 2019). The emphasis placed on respectful conduct in relations by the leadership should provide cues to others further down the hierarchy on how to shape their behaviours.

Looking forward, Primakov (2018) seems optimistic, observing that 'today we gradually return our former skills and know how'. Nevertheless, there is certainly progress to be made, as Yudin (2018) notes that 'it appears that the level of scientific reflection on the methodology, representativeness and practical application of particular ratings from the point of view of studying the phenomenon of soft power remains inadequate.'

9. Over-focus on engaging elites

Another of the core problems afflicting Russia public diplomacy has been identified as the tendency to work with a narrow segment of society in the target country, namely ostensibly pro-Russian forces among the political and economic elites, to the exclusion of the wider population, opinion leaders, NGOs, participants in the decision making process, political analysts and even the scientific and creative intelligentsia (Velikaya 2016). The reactive tendencies characterising the Russian foreign policy process meant the weakness of this approach under current conditions only came on the political radar after the failures in Ukraine (Frolov 2005; Tchernega 2015).

This preponderance to working with a 'select group of aging elites' (Nechepurenko 2015), based on personalised relationships, has been identified as unsustainable in the long run due to the natural change of generations (Sultanov 2008; Bepalov 2011). Russian activity in this regard appears particularly inadequate when compared with the work by 'hundreds of Western NGOs actively [promoting] "Western values" and Western interests in these countries, paying particular attention to the youth' (Tchernega 2015). When trying to attract the youth audience, focusing on fresh faces, the leaders of the future without a potentially dubious Soviet-era past, is easier than relying on references to a past they barely knew and may have ambivalent attitudes towards. Furthermore, the post-Soviet and other status quo regimes that Moscow has tended to support with the aim of preventing 'colour revolution' have often been associated with patchy human rights records (Sultanov 2008). This risks not only casting Moscow on the wrong side of history, but also 'gives the opposition only one alternative, the West. Such a position becomes a trap, both in case of regime change and of the subsequent betrayal of "Kremlin clients"' (Sultanov 2008).

There seems to be a consensus that Russian relationships and consequent influence in the

FSU should not be dependent on changes of political conjunctures in the neighbouring states (Frolov 2005; Solozobov 2008). This means striving to work with all acceptable political groupings, including the opposition, regardless of the quality of relations with the state in question (Bespalov 2011; Solozobov 2008). As such, the focal point of Russian influence abroad 'should be on supporting not concrete persons, but ideas and political positions that prioritise cooperation with the Russian Federation, preserving common humanitarian and cultural space (Frolov 2005).

Simultaneously, there are signs that the Kremlin has understood the need to create 'hope for the future and perspectives for economic and social development' (Sultanov 2008). Sultanov (2008) noted that 'the population of [the target] countries often does not feel any material advantages from privileged relations with Moscow: economic participation of Russia is concentrated largely in the resources sector, and does not offer any meaningful cooperation' (Sultanov 2008). In so far as this becomes realized, this would, again, suggest learning from the Western and especially European experience of soft power projection with its promises of concrete improvements in the standard of living through integration projects, which has so attracted many populations in the "European neighbourhood".

In this context, commentators stress that the main goal of public diplomacy should not be to foist a particular point of view in the manner of primitive propaganda, but to cultivate 'trustful relationships with partners, based on their conviction that cooperation corresponds to their interests' (Bespalov 2011). Indeed, in his public discourse, Vladimir Putin has tended to stress the mutual benefits of cooperation with Russia. Soft power is beneficial for economic cooperation; it lends stability to a business relationship if the partners feel they have a common worldview rather than engaging to maximize profit in spite of negative emotions and fears of image fallout. This is informative for the situation even regarding supposedly pro-Russian oligarchs in Ukraine, whom Karavaev (2012) has described as 'prepared today to earn money in projects with Russia, but by preference [seeing] the future of their development with different partners'. Fearing Russian domination but needing time to adapt their business, these entrepreneurs very much keep their options open, which may be observed in the differing editorial stances of their media outlets, for instance.

Cooperation with business and other third sector organisations is seen as a fruitful direction for Russian soft power. Regarding corporate entities, commentators have pointed to the weakness of state support for Russian businesses abroad (Frolov 2005), with the suggestion that business should '[take] into account geopolitical interests in its economic expansion' (Sultanov 2008) with the implication of reciprocal support as occurs in many other countries. There have been moves to encourage businesses to support soft power development by means of financial support to public diplomacy organisations, such as the Russkiy Mir Foundation.

Concerning normal diplomatic activity, while lauding the successes of Russian diplomacy in recent years, Karaganov (2013) conceded that 'Russia's foreign policy does have its weak spots. Many embassies keep away from society in their host countries just like in Soviet times or even more so. Diplomats are unwilling and do not know how to communicate with people and are not encouraged to do so' (Karaganov 2013). Solozobov (2008) concurs, observing that 'Russian embassies in the CIS have a reputation among career diplomats for

having almost no local links'. This might be considered an issue for training. This research will strive to investigate how far this demand for more engaged, pro-active diplomats with developed communication skills has been noted and addressed by the diplomatic training academies and selection processes.

Another important constituency foreseen by Russian commentators 'consists of nurturing a generation of intelligentsia oriented towards the Russian humanitarian, political and civilisational identity' (Solovyov 2010). Yet with regard to this body of opinion leaders active in the sphere of politics and culture, it is particularly necessary that Russia have an appealing and acceptable worldview that might attract them. Then there comes the matter of motivating and mobilising such credible and respected individuals to serve as 'nodes' (Castells 2009) in a network; reproducing the target narrative in such a way that it is both amenable to the local population and broadly supportive of Russian interests.

With regard to motivating a "friendly" outlook, journalistic sources often make reference to financial methods of inducement. As a tangible, material form of influence, payment is more of a 'hard power' economic lever, although it is worth considering here as its effect can be a means of generating soft power. Although such insinuations are often thrown around in the public domain, such approaches and their impact are by nature rather opaque and difficult to research. It seems that 'point payments' to local experts are seen as a cost-effective and efficient method to achieve this, and apparently '[s]tatements and work "seasoned in the necessary key", are payable according to the testimony of the former RISI employee, rather generously, not only by local but also by Russian standards' (Kamakin 2015). As the furore surrounding the 9 million euro donation to French far-right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen via First Czech-Russia Bank, which is headquartered in Moscow, demonstrated, the legitimacy and authority of an actor may be compromised if they are shown to have been supported by Moscow. Yet apparently the high-profile case of the 'strange credit given to Marine Le Pen' was the exception, with 'no proof of Russian sponsorship of sympathisers of political forces' generally being uncovered. Andrey Kamakin, journalist for *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, explains this thus,

The channels of financing can be the most diverse, and so to investigate these money flows in practically impossible. "It is understood that Moscow does not directly pay anyone anything" [...] but there exists a great number of foundations – practically every big political expert has his own foundation – through which donations may be made. One foundation may donate to another, by a third party... I think each concrete example uses its own technologies. (Kamakin 2015)

Yet while Lilia Shevtsova has opined that "'friends of Russia" attracts to Moscow not so much common ideological ambitions, as open commercial interest" (cited in Kamakin 2015), others suggest one should not put excessive emphasis on the 'recharging of experts' - 'payment-for-position' aspect (Sytyin cited in Kamakin 2015). Thus, Aleksey Makarin (cited in Kamakin 2015) offers the view that 'even if someone finances something, it's not the main thing.' In this expert's opinion, in the majority of cases Western politicians support Putin's Russia for 'absolutely objective reasons: "They act absolutely in their interests. Voters and activists of these parties also don't like the USA and are ready to make friends with whoever's convenient against them"' (Kamakin 2015). It is certainly true that at least some

of the narratives lately articulated as part of a Russian worldview (e.g. cultural pluralism over multiculturalism, traditional values and hierarchies, assumptions of decadence of Western societies) have long been in circulation in the Western European radical right intellectual milieu, and as such have indigenous roots in target countries which can render them more easily accepted when given more material and logistical support. It is possible that Russia has indeed done its market research – Russians are part of these European networks - and responds to unrequited demand for these ideas to have greater prominence. Given resources and moral support, certain socially conservative, culturalist ideas may move from the fringes, where they are publicly taboo, to the realms of mainstream, respectable conversation. As an example of metapolitics (Gramsci 1971) in action, the ability to help incubate such a cultural shift through civil society has clear political implications.

Given the manifest failures of the elite-focused approach and the demonstrated potential of popular engagement, the importance of civil society to soft power is acknowledged (Vasilenko 2013). Numerous Russian analysts draw attention to the need for the involvement of NGOs in public diplomacy (Filimonov 2010; Lukin 2013; Solovyov 2010; Lukin 2013; Vasilenko 2013; Tchernega 2015). Solovyov 2010, for instance, points to the need for a new approach to engaging foreign citizens, noting,

It is necessary to move away from resolving political issues by means of opaque, corridor discussions with leaders of the relevant countries. We ought to constantly broaden the spectrum of participants in the dialogue and do it more transparently and publicly. (Solovyov 2010)

NGOs are acknowledged as possessing relevant skill sets to serve the goals of public diplomacy. For instance, prominent scholar Alexander Lukin (2013) asserts that

The tasks of NGOs abroad should be to establish ties with foreign colleagues, organise events capable of activating scientific and cultural ties between Russian and foreign societies, and presenting to the Russian government and society as a whole objective evaluations of international situations and the image of Russia in the world. Such activities will in many respects enable the creation of an image of Russia abroad as an open, free country that cares about developing and advancing its own scientific and cultural achievements. (Lukin 2013)

While experts note the need for independent NGOs to support effective public diplomacy (Filimonov 2010; Solovyov 2010), a want of genuinely 'civic-minded' (Filimonov 2010) is expressed. Indeed, there exists a divergence in understandings of the role of NGOs in public diplomacy. On one hand, there is the view that Russia should engage with the 'more active and skillful use of modern means of PR and mechanisms developed by NGOs for advancing the popularisation of state policy goals' (Lukin 2013), which seems to regard NGOs as an extension of state capacity. On the other hand, others 'consider that the tasks of NGOs dealing with public diplomacy is not to serve the state, but to realise immediate ties with civil society of other countries with the goal of deepening mutual understanding between peoples' (Lukin 2013). Solovyov (2010) acknowledges this bifurcation, observing that

Existing NGOs have an either semi-state character, and engage on the whole in minimally significant “political tourism”, or are financed from abroad and have connections with an entirely defined agenda that does not correspond with Russia's long-term foreign policy interests. As a result, all our attempts to connect the societal factor with the resolution of foreign policy tasks turns out highly expensive and ineffective.

Lukin (2013) explains this situation by virtue of the fact that,

It is much easier for the bureaucracy to work not with real but with dummy pseudo-NGOs, which it fully controls, than with independent representatives of civil society. That's why today the bureaucracy tries to restore of system of “drive belts”, creating NGOs which are not in fact non-governmental. It is really not possible to consider as parts of civil society organisations whose members are appointed by organs of state power, created by decisions of state organs, and among whose founders number also almost exclusively different ministries and departments’

Indeed, this situation is perpetuated by the fact that the authorities apparently assume that funding determines “loyalty”. Fearing a “birch revolution”, the Russian authorities have placed restrictions on foreign NGOs active in Russia. Furthermore, there is an absence of legal mechanisms of support for NGOs by national business and philanthropic structures. Lukin (2013) reports that,

Their financing is possible through 4 sources: their own state, the non-state milieu of their country, grants of foreign states and foreign non-governmental sources. Precisely the combination of all sources makes them more independent of each other. If it is not possible to get foreign funds, and in the absence of legal mechanisms of support for NGOs by national business structures, then real NGOs become more dependent on their own state.

In addition to bolstering negative framings of Russia as a place where freedoms are limited and dampening public morale (Karaganov 2013), this situation hampers the development of genuine independent NGOs, thereby ‘denying Russia a very effective instrument of soft power’ (Tchernega 2015). Furthermore, the ‘state character’ of Russian NGOs is obvious to foreign partners’ (Lukin 2013). This only negatively affects their credibility and attractiveness as interlocutors, which in turn creates friction in the process of further dissemination of their viewpoints and narratives (Kostikov 2014). Additionally, as state representatives they don’t really bring anything new to the discussion, they are less interesting as partners for foreign NGOs and indeed foreign audiences more generally (Kostikov 2014).

The state-driven nature of Russian NGOs also has negative consequences when it comes to the provision of independent analysis of state policy, the introduction and piloting of alternative ideas and providing a genuine reflection of civil society (Lukin 2013). Given the nature of modern public diplomacy not as unidirectional broadcasting, but as a conversation aimed at mutual understanding (Dolinsky in Lukin 2013), compromising the independence of NGOs weakens their readiness to serve as a feedback channel to the leadership: ‘Who if not independent NGOs is capable of providing object evaluations and not what is pleasant to hear to the leadership?’ (Lukin 2013). Such a lack of effective feedback perpetuates

problems in soft power approaches, as noted above.

An issue surrounding some of those public organisations Russia *has* associated itself with in foreign countries is that some of these have tended to be ‘peripheral’ bodies, for instance, of Russian compatriots abroad. This is potentially problematic not only since these associations tend to be more oriented towards the past than the future, but also as a focus on the ethnic Russian diaspora ‘could be counterproductive, dividing into our minority and the others majority’ (Bespalov 2011). Instead, Russia should propose such initiatives as ‘holding joint events with Ukraine and Belarus and Kazakhstan to perpetuate memory of victims of Holodomor’ (Tchernega 2015), which not only push back against narratives about Russia as “anti-national” in those independent states, but also helps reinforce target narratives concerning a shared past. With regard to the European Union countries, Agayeva (2017) also cautions against developed cooperation with populist movements and groups, warning that,

As a rule, they do not have well thought-out programs of action and their slogans are instinctive responses to voter discontent. There is no doubt that these parties will influence the formation of the political landscape, but they will hardly be the main players in the future. A too close association with them may narrow the field of opportunities for Russia in the longer term.’

Clearly, the findings of the ‘market research’ that analysts identified as necessary must be reflected upon carefully and through the prism of long-term strategic considerations, rather than actioned to gratify demand for short-term tactical gains. It remains to be seen whether Russian soft power work is guided by sufficiently strong strategic leadership to resist such temptations.

Although most critical discussion seems directed at for state-oriented “pseudo-NGOs”, more independently minded civil associations also come under fire for a lack of civic-mindedness, in relation to the previously mentioned alleged tendency of Russians ‘not to hide their vices from others’ (Silayev 2014). Acknowledging the novelty of this style of public diplomacy for both state and society and stressing the need for joint efforts in service of society and the state as a whole, Lukin (2013) asserts that,

For the NGOs, the main thing is to be conscious that, when appearing on the international arena, they represent Russia as a whole, all of society, including the state and not their own self-serving or PR interests. Connected with this, the legal and necessary critic of foreign policy of the country, which may and should be voiced in domestic discussions, is not always appropriate abroad. Such criticism sometimes looks strange even for foreigners, which accepted to pick up with own governments themselves, and don’t complain to about it others. In such a situation, it is especially topical to represent the truly patriotic expression of AS Pushkin: ‘I of course despise my fatherland from my head to my foot, but I’ll be vexed if a foreigner shares this feeling with me.’

This issue presumably relates in part to the fact that a shared vision of what kind of state Russia is and the direction it should pursue is relatively new and still in the process of

coalescing. It has not yet truly acquired the sense of common sense and historically rooted inevitability characteristic of “hegemony” (Gramsci 1971) and which lends a polity stability. The discourse is not fully solidified and the boundaries of constructive criticism are, like trust in the state, in a state of development.

In contrast with the previous tendencies in Russian foreign relations that assumed the adequacy of cultivating of “pro-Russian” elites, there is now some recognition of the importance of horizontal contacts as a means to strengthen “loyal relationships” (Velikaya 2016). Apparently this awareness goes beyond the expert community and has penetrated the decision-making ranks as measures have been undertaken in this regard. Lukin (2013) notes that, ‘in recent times, the state has undertaken significant efforts to attract similar NGOs to work on programmes of public diplomacy, giving them material and organisational help’. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is said to play a coordinating role, ‘[organizing] regular meetings with NGO reps, supporting their foreign activities, especially cooperation with UN and its bodies’ (Lukin 2013). Of the organisations recently established with a public diplomacy remit, the Gorchakov Foundation has a particular responsibility for supporting Russian NGOs, as well as implementing its own projects in this field (Burlinova 2013).

Another method of inciting independent yet somewhat controllable civil society activity in a desired direction, is the provision of grants to fund projects, both based in Russia and abroad. In recent years, several bodies have begun to support projects in this way, namely

- Orthodox Initiative of the Russian Orthodox Church
- Presidential grants
- Gorchakov Foundation
- Russkiy Mir Foundation

Beyond such concrete measures, Lebedeva (2016) gives grounds for optimism regarding attitudinal change, commenting that

Simultaneously, in Russian societal-political life the sphere of public diplomacy has started to gather strength. In it, the main subjects are people themselves, Russian citizens who are not indifferent to what’s going on in Russia, that is to say, the initiative-taking of part of society, and also NGOs are playing a noticeable role in the realisation of the state’s foreign policy strategy.

If true, this would be a major boon to the cause of Russian soft power, and indeed reflected what Dmitri Medvedev called for in 2012, namely for those who ‘consider themselves to be a part of Russia, who are not ashamed of it and who understand the challenges we face’ to act quickly and coherently and in the spirit of caring.⁷ Further research will strive to corroborate this.

Concluding remarks

This paper has flagged up a number of issues related to the cultivation of Russian soft power in the long-term perspective. The diagnoses are based on the commentaries of Russian experts. Inevitably there remain many open questions, particularly concerning the extent to which the prescriptions for addressing the problems proposed by analysts have been, are

⁷ <http://archive.government.ru/eng/stens/20531/>

being and will be implemented. Yet, the subject matter itself is a work in progress, so one should not expect to be able to tick off as resolved many or even any of the issues highlighted, particularly since some of the issues related to engrained customs of Russian political culture which will not change overnight. However, it should be possible to observe trends and indicators of political will, and to point out initiatives and comment upon their efficiency even at this interim stage, which will be the focus of the next stage of the research.

DRAFT

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ДРАФТ