
THE SOFT POWER OF RUSSIA

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Abstract: The original concept of "soft power", as thought by Joseph Nye, is organized around the principle of attraction. Accumulating and projecting one's "power gentle", it is above all to try to make it attractive to people and targeted governments abroad, primarily mobilizing resources from civil society. This approach prevails in most liberal democracies and generally applies to their instruments of "public diplomacy": cultural institutes, international media, NGOs, creative industries or design agencies public relations. However, adopting the concept and practices of soft power by illiberal, semi-authoritarian or authoritarian states, invites us to question interpreting Nye's concept and redefining its priorities outside the framework democratic-liberal.

Keywords: Soft power, Russian public diplomacy, The Foreign Policy Concept

1. INTRODUCTION

In Russia, the concept of "soft power" has been integrated into the Concept of political foreign affairs published in 2013 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This formalization late is essentially due to two reasons: on the one hand, the reluctance of a large part of the Russian politico-diplomatic establishment to employ a concept of liberal substance, associated with the influence exerted by the United States via its NGOs and its cultural and agro-food industries; on the other hand, the pre-eminence of a realistic approach to international relations emphasizing the pursuit of national by the means of hard power rather than by the development of "power of attraction". Yet Russia's public diplomacy apparatus was erected in the mid-1990s. 2000s, often mirroring models that have proven themselves abroad, such as the major Anglo-Saxon continuous news channels and the institutes Chinese Confucius.

To quote his main instruments, in chronological order of launch: the public media group Russia Today (RT since 2009) in 2005, today composed of six channels television, six online newspapers and multiple accounts on social media; the Rousskii Mir Foundation ("World Russian") for the preservation of the Russian language in 2007; the multilingual newspaper Russia Beyond The Headlines (RBTH) in 2007 ; the Rossotrudnichestvo federal agency for the "humanitarian cooperation" (coordination of exchanges cultural, scientific and academic) in 2008, which oversees the action of the 92 centers for science and culture ; the Gorchakov foundation for supporting diplomacy public in 2010; or the Rossia information agency Segodnia in 2013, and its international branch Sputnik in 2014, following the merger of the Voice of Russia radio and the RIA Novosti news agency. (Valentini, F.B. 2022, p.1)

Russian public diplomacy also presents the particularity of being very state-controlled, either by the structure government of its main instruments, i.e. by the loyalty of its few non-state actors. There Russian foreign policy indeed remains intolerant of manifestations of pluralism on the international scene and for this reason limits the emergence of a real Russian "non-governmental diplomacy", like American diplomacy.

A soft power to fight back, compete and retain Largely dominated by an offensive media tool, "Russian soft power" (miagkaïa sila) is today less driven by a principle of attraction than by three modes complementary actions that constitute its originality. First, the development of Russian public diplomacy is part of a response dynamic, which has its origins in the mid-2000s, following "color revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.

The Kremlin realizes the need to reconsider its foreign policy, in order to respond to an unstable situation that he perceives as spurred on by the United States and the European Union, anxious to extend their influence "abroad close to Russia.

The renewal of Russian cultural diplomacy is given as a priority to preserve the cultural ties of the post-Soviet states with Russia and to safeguard the place of the Russian language there. The first version of Russia Today (2005-2008), the RBTH newspaper and the establishment of partnerships with research agencies. Western public relations and nation branding then aim, if not to improve, at least to "normalize" the image of Russia in the world. The 2008 Russo-Georgian war marked a turning point. Judged unilaterally and in favor of Tbilisi, its coverage by the Western media transmutes the posture reactive Russian public diplomacy in a competitive dynamic vis-à-vis of the "liberal West", in order to discredit its political and media representatives and demystify its social model by displaying its fractured areas. Also, the RT group, which is thereby gaining notoriety, is developing a much more offensive editorial line, in order to counter the vision of events propagated by the "mainstream media" and "break the monopoly of the Anglo-Saxon media in the world. What soft power for Russia? information", in the words of Vladimir Putin during a visit to the chain's offices in 2013. In 2014, Sputnik completes the audiovisual Russian exterior, from a more provocative angle, sometimes plotter. Orchestrated by the same editor-in-chief, Margarita Simonian, the two media drain in 2017 more than 400 million euros in public subsidies. Their "alternative" and

relativist editorial policy, assumed and kremlino-compatible, generally intended for protest and anti-liberal audiences, right as well as left, is always declined and adapted according to the targeted countries and their landscape national media. (Feklyunina, V., & Theys, S. (2019), p. 145)

This trademark is as much the source of their significant success in several regions of the world (United States, Eastern Europe, West, Middle East, Mexico) only accusations recurring “propaganda megaphone” and “organs of influence”, for quoting respectively former US Secretary of State John Kerry in April 2014 and the President Emmanuel Macron in June 2017. Signs of a form of “hardening” activities traditionally associated with soft power, institutional responses have already been set up by NATO (Stratcom) and the European Union (East Task Force), aimed at undermining the “information campaigns” carried out by the Russia.

Finally, rather than seduce beyond its direct scope of influence, the software Russian power seeks more to mobilize audiences that maintain a priori cultural and spiritual ties with Russia, as well as a vision of the world valuing the defense of multilateralism and “traditional values”. This policy primarily affects members of the diaspora, the “compatriots from abroad”, which the government estimates at 30 million people, including 18 million in the post-Soviet space. They embody, in the eyes of the Russian authorities, as many potential influencers in their country of residence. Support for schools and Russian-language media abroad, promotion by centers of Rossotrudnichestvo of a very classic and politicized cultural agenda or, more recently, the inauguration in Paris of the Orthodox Spiritual and Cultural Center in October 2016, constitute the various manifestations of this loyalty enterprise. Additionally, several think tanks and non-governmental organizations, such as the ISEPI foundation and its subsidiary Rethinking Russia, question the potential attractiveness of the mode of governance vertical and contemporary Russian conservatism, particularly vis-à-vis Europe, of which he theoretically poses as the guardian of traditional values and identities. Vladimir Putin's Russia manages to project itself, on the communication level, as one of the main bastions of institutional and moral illiberalism, in the face of the crisis of confidence cracking most western liberal democracies. Nevertheless, Russian conservatism does not constitute, in substance, an alternative model exportable, both in terms of its marginal ability to mobilize outside the borders only by its lack of effective anchorage within the Russian population. (Colton, T. (2022), p.16)

When, in the early 1990s, the American Joseph Nye theorized this notion, Russia had other concerns. On the one hand, the state was immersed in the difficult post-Soviet transition and crisis management was its unique mode of operation. The times demanded not sophisticated tools of foreign policy but emergency measures. On the other hand, the very idea that Russia could need a specific “power” to reinforce its influence and its prestige took time to germinate. In the early days of liberal romanticism, it seemed that the country, freed from ideological burden and superpower status, would quite naturally become a full member of the great family of “civilized peoples” and act in concert with its new peers. The formula “national interest” was perceived as a shameful relic of the past. 3Twenty years later, all of this is hard to believe, as Russia's perception of its foreign policy and its place in the world has changed. Moscow relies on a somewhat cumbersome and “old-fashioned” but effective diplomacy, which has steadily strengthened its positions throughout the 2000s, essentially using traditional instruments - hard power and levers. economic. But as Russia again became an important international player, experts and researchers increasingly referred to J. Nye's theory, which would eventually gain undeniable popularity. (Fehér, Z. (2022), p.3)

With the return to the presidency of Vladimir Putin, the development of soft power has been made a national priority. Thus, the latest version of the Foreign Policy Concept, adopted in early 2013, explicitly stipulates: “‘Soft power’ [...] becomes an integral part of contemporary international politics”.

The interest aroused by the concept is due to the situation in which Russia found itself at the start of the 2010s. its position and interests. The Russo-Georgian war of August 2008 represented the culmination of this process. Despite extremely unfavorable media coverage in Moscow, despite the outbreak of anti-Russian sentiments in the West, the strategic objectives had been achieved.

The enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the post-Soviet space has de facto come to an end and has ceased to be a priority for Western countries, starting with the United States. But, gradually, Russian officials understood that this success represented the maximum that was possible to obtain through the traditional instruments of power. Russia was not looking for real expansion; it did not have the potential to become a global superpower again; its military-political resources were sufficient to solve the Georgian problem, but not to meet more ambitious objectives.

At the same time, economic opportunities were being eroded. The international financial crisis was a first worrying sign: it highlighted the vulnerability of the Russian economy and its dependence on the situation prevailing on the commodity market, over which Moscow has little control. And as the world began to emerge from the crisis, it became increasingly clear that Russia's economy – struggling even in a favorable environment in terms of commodity prices – was both inefficient and in overheated. In addition, the negative image of Russia, widely perceived as a backward and unreliable country, weakened its positions on the international scene, in particular its

ability to attract foreign investment, an increasingly important factor in the context of economic stagnation. . In short, Russia objectively needed to find new ways to improve its image and increase its weight on the international scene. And since she had hardly been concerned with developing her soft power, she seemed to have promising potential in this area.

2. SOFT POWER SEEN BY THE KREMLIN

In the official Russian interpretation, the notion of soft power covers a phenomenon that is much more political than the American and European meaning. Of course, J. Nye himself had developed a concept that was above all political in nature, but the Russian vision very significantly increases the meaning and scope of this instrument. From this point of view, V. Putin's article "Russia in a Changing World", his programmatic manifesto on foreign policy, published in February 2012, is very revealing: "It is a set of tools and methods for achieving foreign policy objectives without the use of force, using exclusively informational and other levers of influence. Unfortunately, these methods are frequently used to provoke and sustain extremism, separatism and nationalism; to manipulate public opinion; to interfere directly in the politics of sovereign states. A very clear distinction should be made between, on the one hand, freedom of speech and normal political activity and, on the other, the illicit use of the instruments of "soft power". One can only salute the civilized work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) [...], including those that actively criticize the powers that be. On the other hand, it is unacceptable that "pseudo-NGOs" and other strong structures of external support aim to destabilize this or that country. [...] There are in the current world many "agents of influence" working for great powers, blocs, corporations. [...] Russia itself has such institutions... (Trenin, D. (2019), p. 6)

The use of the adjective "illicit" to qualify "soft power" perfectly characterizes the very specific perception that Russia has of this concept. It is remarkable that V. Putin opposes to Western practice not only the Russian approach, but the behavior of the BRICS (Brazil, India, China, here, and South Africa, in addition to Russia) - a community of countries that jointly embody a nascent alternative to the Western worldview.

The Foreign Policy Concept is also concerned about these negative aspects: "The growth of global competition and the accumulation of crisis potential often lead to the risk of the destructive and illicit use of 'soft power' abroad with a view to exerting political pressure on sovereign States, intervening in their internal affairs, destabilizing the situation there, manipulating public opinion and conscience, including within the framework of the financing of humanitarian projects and projects related to the protection of human rights

Russian political practice admits several interpretations of the concept of soft power. The simplest reduces "soft power" to counter-propaganda, a notion well-known since Soviet times. V. Putin seems close to this meaning, he who has repeatedly asserted that Russian policy is misunderstood in the West because it is poorly explained there. Hence the aspiration to further disseminate the Russian vision of international events, above all through the creation of generously funded news media. In this regard, the Russia Today (RT) television channel is generally considered successful. This channel, which broadcasts in three languages (English, Arabic, Spanish), was apparently intended, at first sight, to improve the image of Russia, but quickly transformed itself, presenting international events in an alternative way to western view. RT's English service, the largest of the three, is a consistent and vehement critic of American policy. The channel's audience is growing all over the world, because it provides a radically different interpretation of things from that of Western media. The relative popularity of this approach is explained by the fact that after the Cold War the world was long deprived of pluralism in the perception of events. In many parts of the world, including the United States, the demand for another vision is not being met.

However, in the world of global communication, representations become a real material factor whose weight is equal to, and sometimes greater than, the classic forms of affirmation of power. It is commonly believed in Russia that "information wars" play a fundamental role in contemporary international politics. Some go so far as to consider that the control of the story would constitute the decisive advantage of a West which, as the specialist in international relations Sergei Karaganov affirms, would be on the way to losing its superiority in other areas, in particular in the face of a Asia in full growth, and would insist all the more on the diffusion of its vision of the world. In addition to RT, the formation of an alternative discourse has been entrusted to the radio station The Voice of Russia, a very old station which is currently experiencing a new boom.

3. CULTURE AND DIASPORA, RELAY OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE?

Added to this ambition is that of promoting Russian culture, language and education. A notable event was the creation, in the mid-2000s, of the state foundation Rousskiï Mir (Russian World), responsible for the preservation and dissemination of the Russian language in the world. If we judge by the formal indicators, this fund has met with great success: it has opened representations all over the planet, from Jakarta to Buenos Aires via Sydney and Seattle. But many observers have doubts about its real effectiveness: a good part of these representations are only small

offices located in local universities, where a few Russian-language books are stored, often gathered at random. The fact remains that Rousskii Mir, created on the model of the Goethe Institut, the British Council or the Alliance française, is capable of playing a positive role in the promotion of Russian culture. (Lacombe, L. P. (2019), p. 70)

Special attention is also paid to Russians abroad, officially considered to be a preponderant element of the country's "soft power". Their situation has always been particularly complex. Most of the diaspora resides in the former Soviet republics. The collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) made Russians a divided people: 25 million of them suddenly found themselves outside national borders without having changed their place of residence. Formally, the policy concerning Russians abroad has always been a priority; in fact, this was never the case. The fate of Russian speakers living in neighboring countries was only mentioned during the election period and constituted a lever of pressure, especially on the Baltic States.

The question of protecting compatriots occupies a central place in Moscow's political rhetoric, but its attention is primarily focused on matters occurring in the United States. The controversy surrounding the Dima Yakovlev law, which constituted the Russian response to the Magnitsky Act passed by the American Congress, includes not only measures to protect Russian orphans adopted by Americans and to punish those guilty of ill-treatment of their respect, but also a broader set of instruments. Moscow is considering in particular the trials of businessman Viktor Bout and airplane pilot Konstantin Yaroshenko, sentenced in the United States to heavy prison terms for serious, unjust and politically motivated crimes. The attention paid by the Russian authorities to the needs of their compatriots residing in neighboring countries is much less, which is very detrimental to the image of Russia. (Ferran, L. & Patrick Reeve, P. (2019), p.1)

4. SOFT POWER: WHAT CAN RUSSIA OFFER? A NON-ATTRACTIVE POWER?

In principle, all these measures, already implemented or in the process of being implemented, are entirely rational and useful. But this infrastructure, this packaging, now needs content. Money is not enough. For the time being, Russian "soft power" lacks this substance that would make the development model advocated by Moscow attractive. The Soviet model, whatever criticisms its practical implementation may have provoked, was based on the ideas of social progress and justice. Even though faith in this model gradually died out as the world discovered the other side of the "new society" coin, it still extended its aura on the planet for several decades. Moreover, the USSR was not content with proposing an alternative model of society: it also actively promoted this model beyond its borders, openly defying its ideological adversary. Therefore, many countries felt that the Soviet Union could potentially be a powerful protector. It is true that the USSR showed itself willingly generous with all those who were ready to join it. This generosity was often detrimental to the metropolis, which lived less well than many of the peripheries, but expansion was considered an absolute priority objective. Contemporary Russia, whose watchword, particularly in its relations with other countries, is "profit above all", appears much more pragmatic but, also, much less attractive. To be fair, it must be stressed that the international status of the USSR rested, in the first place, not on its "soft" power, but on its military-political power and its ability to use it. Without this component, the most seductive of ideologies would not have been enough to make the country a superpower; in the same way, the United States today owes its hegemony above all to its military-political capacities and only secondarily to the attraction exerted by the "American dream".

The European Union (EU) vividly illustrates the fact that an immense potential in terms of soft power is not enough to obtain a leading global political role. Russia does not have the ideological ferment from which a message likely to attract the attention of the rest of the world could be born. Certainly, in recent times, power and society, now that Soviet resources have been completely exhausted, have been looking for a substitute model. But, for the time being, Russia is unable to produce anything other than a traditionalist and conservative discourse, therefore clearly opposed to progress. And when the authorities decide to seek the "new Russian identity", they propose to do so by delving into the distant past and reconnecting with traditions dating from before the USSR. Whether this approach is good or bad, it is difficult to imagine that the World Festival of Youth and Students could bring to the "youth of the world" a conservative message directed towards a "golden age" long since long and based on the protection of the traditional family against "homosexual perversion". Such a discourse is certainly able to seduce a certain number of individuals, but it will be a very particular assembly extending from the European far right to the Islamists of the Middle East.

Even the neighboring countries are not very receptive to this message turned towards the past. If there is still a certain nostalgia for the quiet existence that disappeared with the Soviet Union, the active and promising part of their populations is no longer very sensitive to it. The significant cultural and linguistic presence of Russia in the former Soviet republics is in decline – these countries have already been building independent states for twenty years – and is not synonymous with political loyalty on their part – the Russian language is widely spoken in Azerbaijan, which does not make it a close partner and ally of Russia.

The situation is even darker with regard to the idea of justice. Since the disappearance of the USSR, Russia has acquired the image throughout the world of a State living off the rent offered to it by its raw materials and incapable of redistributing this windfall in a way that is even remotely balanced in favor of the majority of its citizens. This does little to increase the popularity of the Russian state among the popular masses abroad. Nor in Russia, for that matter.

4. CONCLUSION: WHAT INFLUENCE IN THE WORLD FOR POST-SOVIET RUSSIA?

There is another type of manifestation of solidarity. The World Youth Festivals had the slogan: “For anti-imperialist solidarity, for peace, for friendship!” Anti-imperialist solidarity, that is, opposition to American and Western domination, does not contradict the course set by Moscow. But the difference is that the USSR did not just talk about its opposition to the West: it actually opposed it and recruited other countries to support its fight. Moreover, if Russia retains a certain prestige in the Third World to this day, it is because it is seen as the shadow of the USSR, that is to say a power which, if it does not embody a systemic alternative to the West, represents at the very least a counterweight to its cultural and political monopoly.

But this is only a residual perception. First, because Russia is not issuing a systemic challenge to the West: its fierce attitude is only intended to protect its own interests, not to unite around it. Second, while the USSR held the torch of anti-colonialism – an ideology very popular during the collapse of empires in the second half of the 20th century – Russia was mired in complex post-imperial sentiments. . And the animosity of an awakening “Third World” towards the West (cf. the “Arab Spring”) does not imply an increase in sympathy towards Russia. In a global context of great upheavals, this one fits, with its protective pathos, in the category of reactionaries, and not progressives. Especially since, thanks to the Soviet heritage, it holds privileges in the Security Council of the United Nations that provoke the growing irritation of most of the States of the world.

However, it should be emphasized that it is precisely the ambition to represent an alternative to the dominant discourse and to offer another perspective on international affairs that bears the greatest potential in terms of “soft power”. This is explained above all by the fact that, on many issues, Western policy proves incapable of resolving crisis situations. In this regard, the reaction to Moscow's proposal to adopt a new approach to the resolution of the crisis in Syria, starting with the destruction of the chemical arsenal of Damascus, is eloquent. V. Putin's much commented article published in the New York Times did more to improve Russia's image in the eyes of the West than the millions of rubles invested in counter-propaganda, because the Russian president has put forward a solution that allowed many actors to avoid having to engage in actions they did not want. The ability to influence others comes from having an attractive pattern within. This opinion is shared by the entire political world in Russia, from the far left to the nationalists, including the liberals and the right. Only such a model can be diffused outwards and cause a positive effect. For the time being, Russia has nothing to broadcast: all the discussions relating to national unity, moral renewal, social solidarity and, more broadly, the quest for a modern and lasting identity, begun since the end of 2012 , have so far led to nothing concrete, even if the objectives are very ambitious. The Foreign Policy Concept affirms the need for “the formation of a value base for common actions and the support of a common spiritual and moral denominator which has always existed in the main religions of the world, including principles and notions such as the aspiration for peace and justice, dignity, freedom and responsibility, honesty, charity and diligence”.

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