

Fatal attraction? Russia's soft power in its neighbourhood

Eleonora Tafuro

>> Much current analysis of Russian influence in its neighbourhood focuses on its use of 'hard power' tools. However, analysing Russia's soft power efforts is no less important for understanding the full nature of Moscow's power strategy in its neighbourhood. When Harvard scholar Joseph Nye developed the concept of 'smart power', he described it as the ability to combine the tools of hard and soft power, that is, to use both sticks and carrots (coercion and payment) and the power of attraction (making others want what you want).

To date, Russia appears to be more confident using hard power measures to pursue its neighbourhood interests, in particular trying to dissuade neighbours from a closer relationship with the European Union (EU). Ukraine is the most glaring example. First the Kremlin tried 'carrots' (such as large loans with few strings attached, gas price discounts etc.), then moved onto 'sticks' (trade embargoes, gas price hikes, and eventually the annexation of Crimea and further destabilisation of the East). Most of the other five countries in the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova – have also experienced Russian hard power in recent years. Plus, Russia has plenty of leverage to do so in many of the five Central Asian republics. For example, Russia is the main destination for their migrant workers, and according to the World Bank, remittances account for 48 per cent of Tajikistan's GDP and 31 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Russia has been trying to boost its power of attraction in its neighbourhood, but with mixed results so far.
- Russian minorities in its neighbours are the main target of Russia's soft power activities, but they are also used by the Kremlin as a reason to interfere in other states' affairs.
- Russia's Kremlin-driven use of soft power alongside hard power in the neighbourhood undermines Russia's attempts to become a genuine pole of attraction.

»»»»» Even so, Russia is not neglecting the use of soft power. The Putin regime perceives Russia as an alternative geopolitical pole with an anti-liberal social outlook, a type of 'Conservative International' in opposition to the West. It offers its neighbours a path for regional integration through the Customs Union, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the envisaged Eurasian Union, in competition with that of the EU and NATO. Plus, Moscow funds cultural programmes based on the idea of a common identity, language and history in the post-Soviet space, and tries to spread its messages through well-resourced Kremlin-linked media outlets.

CULTURE, VALUES AND THE EURASIAN UNION

Russia has a number of advantages for implementing a soft power strategy in its neighbourhood: the presence of large Russian minorities; a shared history; cultural and linguistic proximity; a larger economy and energy resources. The Kremlin's soft power tools include cultural and linguistic programmes, scholarships for foreign students, well-equipped media outlets, Christian Orthodoxy, and a visa-free regime with many neighbours that makes Russia's labour market relatively accessible. The power of international attraction is based on political values, and the Kremlin tries to offer an alternative narrative to the West. This vision is not only based on multipolarity, but also as a defender of conservative (anti-liberal) values – a world view that appeals to many in the neighbours. During his presidential address to the Russian Federal Assembly in December 2013, Putin outlined his conservative vision, presenting the EU and the West more generally as decadent places where traditions and values are 'eroding', accepting 'without question the equality of good and evil'.

To counter annual EU reports on human rights abuses, last year the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published for the second time its own 'Report on the Human Rights Situation in the

European Union', blasting human rights protection throughout the EU. In particular, the Russian report accuses the EU of conducting 'aggressive propaganda of homosexual love' in other countries, by attempting to 'enforce on other countries an alien view of homosexuality and same-sex marriages as a norm of life and some kind of a natural social phenomenon that deserves support at the state level'. Homophobic sentiments are very common in the post-Soviet space, and Russia is fomenting them as part of a broader effort to counter the EU's influence. For instance, in Ukraine both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Embassy have played a role in pushing the 'civilisation' argument against integration with the EU. The group Ukrainian Choice, funded by Viktor Medvedchuk, a businessman close to Putin, and Russian diplomats have distributed pamphlets warning that 'association with the EU means same-sex marriage'.

The Kremlin also tries to create a shared identity in the post-Soviet space based on common language, religion and history through several government organisations, the most important of which is *Rossotrudnichestvo* – the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation. The Kremlin is worried that the use of the Russian language is declining in the business and cultural life of neighbouring countries, and some of *Rossotrudnichestvo*'s projects are devoted to its promotion. It also organises recurrent commemorations of crucial episodes of Russia's history, drawing upon the rhetoric of fraternity and the nostalgia for the 'glorious past' and especially for the Soviet empire. However, a member of the Belarusian United Civil Party told this author that this emphasis on celebrating a shared 'glorious history' would also explain why most of the attendees at these events tend to be the elderly.

Apart from developing its values- and culture-based narrative, Russia has also been promoting a new model of regional economic and political

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integration to counter the EU's, the Eurasian Union. So far it consists only of a customs union – meant to become a broader Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) during 2015 and lead to a political union down the line. The project has obtained mixed results so far. To date, only Kazakhstan and Belarus have become full-fledged members of the Customs Union with Russia. However, the initiative has increasingly garnered public attention in other neighbouring countries in recent years: in Moldova, for instance, only a slight majority (44 per cent, it was 55 per cent in 2009) of the respondents of a January poll declared a preference to integrate with the EU over Russia

(40 per cent, 30 percent in 2009). Armenia and Kyrgyzstan had stated their interest to join the Customs Union before the Ukraine crisis broke out, while Tajikistan might also feel obliged due to its dependence on Moscow.

However, it remains to be seen what impact recent events in Ukraine may have

on the further development of the Eurasian Union (see also FRIDE commentary no.6 *The end of Russia's Eurasian project*). Russia's use of military force to assert its interests, together with questionable economic benefits and the vagueness of the political component of the Union, shows the asymmetry of the relations among partners in favour of Russia. That may discourage potential new members from joining, and further exasperate differences among current partners. A meeting in Minsk in April, where the three Customs Union partners were supposed to set up the definitive conditions for signing the EEU treaty, ended with no agreement. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, quoted by local news agency *BelTA*, even suggested postponing the formation of the EEU if the par-

ties are not ready for it. Despite the planned signature of the EEU treaty in Astana on 29 May, therefore, the actual implementation of this project will likely continue to face political and economic obstacles.

MEDIA OUTLETS AND DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

The soft power tool *par excellence* is media. Although their actual influence is different in every country of the post-Soviet space, Russian news and entertainment networks are widely followed due to the widespread use of the Russian language. As for new media, the so-called *Runet*, the ensemble of all Russian-language-based Internet activities taking place in the world, is becoming increasingly relevant as an influential platform for Russian soft power. Russian websites, including Kremlin-aligned online news services like *Regnum*, consistently rank among the top most visited in all neighbouring countries, as shown by Internet traffic estimates from Alexa, Amazon's analytical company.

Russia's mobilisation of media outlets includes classic public relations methods (such as buying space in international media to publish supplements like 'Russia Beyond the Headlines'), and propaganda (as demonstrated by the biased news coverage of the Ukrainian crisis from the English-language *Russia Today* television station). In some cases, the Kremlin also resorts to 'friendly' local media to get its messages across. In the Baltic republics, Russia influences the media environment with the help of the Russian language television station, *First Baltic Channel (PBK)*, which re-broadcasts the news from Russia's publicly-funded *Channel One*. In 2012, the total audience of *PBK* in the Baltics exceeded 4 million viewers.

A 2014 report from the Center for International Media Assistance says that *PBK* is the second most watched channel in Latvia, which among the three republics has the highest percentage of



»»»»» ethnic Russians (more than a quarter of the population). According to the same report, if Georgia and Azerbaijan local media are more independent of Russian influence (if not of their own governments), in Armenia, Belarus and Moldova they are much more vulnerable to Russian propaganda. Russia probably has its strongest influence over the information space in the Central Asian republics, although the situation has slightly improved thanks to cable television packages offering programmes in Russian that originate outside of the Russian Federation, according to Martha Brill Olcott, Co-Director of the Al-Farabi Carnegie Programme on Central Asia. Whether more direct or more subtle, Russia's media presence in the neighbouring countries is strong, and an important vehicle for the promotion of the Kremlin's foreign policy objectives.

During 2013, along with its aforementioned cultural activities, the Kremlin also made the *Rossotrudnichestvo* agency responsible for international development, as a way of promoting Russian values in recipient countries. Until recently, Russia allocated funds to multilateral projects through international organisations like the World Bank, which distributed them among developing countries. Russian officials announced that *Rossotrudnichestvo* would be transformed into an agency with a proactive and primarily bilateral approach to international development, with Putin pledging to increase its budget from the current 0.03 per cent of Russia's GDP to 0.1 per cent by 2020.

This new approach points to a Russian effort to use international aid to project soft power around the world, especially in the former Soviet republics where *Rossotrudnichestvo* is most active. In the official plan for developing *Rossotrudnichestvo* centres abroad between 2013 and 2015, 9 out of the 11 planned centres are in the neighbourhood. The focus on the post-Soviet republics as the main recipients of Russian aid was reiterated in the new Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation in the field of international development assistance, signed by

Putin at the end of April. Moscow's support for and establishment of new Government-Organised Non-Governmental Organisations (GONGOs) in the post-Soviet space, such as the Estonian youth organisation *Molodoje Slovo*, inspired by the pro-Putin youth movement *Nashi* in Russia, is also likely to continue. They represent another means to influence public debates in the neighbours, although it is hard to assess their real impact.

RUSSIAN MINORITIES IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD: THE KREMLIN'S PASSE-PARTOUT?

'Compatriots', meaning Russian minorities in other countries, are central to Russia's soft power in the post-Soviet space, as they are the main target of Russian soft power organisations such as *Rossotrudnichestvo*. According to the 1999 Russian Federation's State Policy toward Compatriots Living Abroad, 'compatriots' are very broadly defined, including Russians living abroad, former citizens of the Soviet Union, Russian immigrants, descendants of compatriots, and even foreign citizens who admire Russian culture and language. A 2011 report published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 'Russian Soft Power in the 21st Century', estimated that this so-called *Russkiy Mir* (the Russian world) outside Russia consists of roughly 35 million people, mainly concentrated in the post-Soviet space.

This vast but politically constructed 'diaspora' is institutionalised through several organisations, such as the *Russkiy Dom* (Russia House, a kind of Russian version of the British Council or Spanish Cervantes Institute) network or the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation, whose purpose is 'reconnecting the Russian diaspora with its homeland through cultural and social programs, exchanges and assistance in relocation'. The Russian Orthodox Church and its head, Patriarch Kirill, also play an important role in spreading the idea of a 'Russian world' and in supporting the Kremlin's policies. Apart from cultural and language programmes,

this network of organisations pursues policies against the ‘falsification of history’ or measures to defend compatriots’ rights against national governments. Every three years, a World Congress of Russian Compatriots is held, although the number of participants appears to be steadily declining: according to the Russkiy Mir Foundation website (www.russkiymir.ru), the last Congress in St. Petersburg in 2012 hosted nearly 500 activists, half the number that attended the previous edition in Moscow in 2009.

The defence of the interests of ‘compatriots’ has often served as an excuse for the Kremlin to meddle in other states’ internal affairs in much harder ways. For example, Moscow’s issuing of passports to citizens in neighbouring states represents an easy way to create or strengthen pro-Russian sectors of the population and influence local politics – despite the resolute opposition of many neighbouring governments to this practice. This ‘passportisation’ strategy created legal grounds – in Moscow’s eyes – to intervene militarily in Crimea to protect Russian citizens. Similarly, prior to the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, many Russian passports were issued to citizens of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Although it is hard to find exact figures, studies (such as ‘South Ossetia: The Burden of Recognition’ published by the International Crisis Group in 2010) affirm that Russian passport holders include all active, non-ethnic Georgian adults in Abkhazia who applied and almost the entire population of South Ossetia. According to Freedom House, in Transnistria roughly a third of the population is believed to hold Russian passports, while the Chief of the Armenian National Migration Service declared that in Armenia the number is between 200-300,000 (10 per cent of the population). Furthermore, Putin recently signed a law relaxing the requirements for obtaining Russian citizenship. Those who are fluent in Russian or have lived in the Soviet Union are all eligible, which points to an increasing political exploitation of Russian minorities by the Kremlin.

CONCLUSION: IS RUSSIA A SMART POWER IN ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD?

Russia’s attempts to project soft power in its neighbourhood have in no way softened the Kremlin’s willingness to use hard power to assert its influence, including military force. To counter the prospect of its neighbours integrating more closely with the EU and defend its ‘legitimate interests’ in the post-Soviet space, the Kremlin has used every instrument in its hard power toolbox. These include trade restrictions and bans, threats to expel from Russia immigrant workers from neighbouring countries, and massive financial and political support to breakaway regions in the neighbours.

Moscow’s deployment of both hard and soft power measures seems to suggest that Russia is trying to balance its power strategy in a ‘smart’ way, to paraphrase Joseph Nye. However, there are several obstacles to this approach in Russia’s case. Recent events in Crimea are a case in point. Russia had considerable soft power in Crimea, based on historical ties and the large Russian minority there. However, by using military power in Crimea, the Kremlin sent a strong message to its neighbours that it is prepared to coercively assert its authority – which in turn undermines its efforts to become a pole of attraction.

Second, Russia’s concept of soft power is different from those in the West. Soft power in the US and the EU is mainly produced by a pluralistic civil society, culture and the ‘way of life’ in general. This is not to say that Western governments do not seek to channel soft power through various means, but that is (a small) part of a much wider set of factors that determine the attractiveness of respective countries, from successful brands to media icons or high living standards. Conversely, in Russia the Kremlin is the main soft power actor, reinforcing the impression that Russia’s soft power is largely Soviet-style propaganda in support of Moscow’s foreign policy goals.

Lastly, due to its neo-imperialistic and polarising rhetoric and by targeting ‘compatriots’, Russia’s



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»»»» soft power policies do not seem to have been very effective in promoting Russia's image amongst non-Russians. In fact, Russia's soft power policies are likely to deepen political cleavages within neighbouring societies, mobilising people who are already pro-Russian but generating the opposite effect on those who are not. For example, despite anti-EU state propaganda on official television, positive public perceptions of the EU in Belarus – perhaps the closest political neighbour to Moscow – have increased from 40 per cent in 2008 to 55 per cent in 2013, according to a University of Kent survey commissioned by the Office for Democratic Belarus. In other neighbours, such as Ukraine or Moldova, public opinion remains deeply divided between supporters of integration with Russia or with the EU – but this is not only because of Russian soft power efforts.

It is not easy to assess the impact of Russia's soft power in its neighbourhood, partly due to the profound differences that characterise the post-

Soviet countries. But the vision of an alternative geopolitical pole plays on anti-Western sentiments and nostalgia for the Soviet past found in many neighbouring societies. Plus, Russia's deep economic and social ties with neighbours (including significant minorities) and powerful media outlets, are other elements that might help the Kremlin achieve its short-term foreign policy objectives. However, Russia's willingness to use hard power to impose its objectives, and lack of positive vision to attract non-Russian populations in neighbouring countries, mean that its soft power is unlikely to endure in the long-term.

Eleonora Tafuro is junior researcher at FRIDE.

e-mail: fride@fride.org
www.fride.org
