



Russian soft power in Ukraine: A structural perspective



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ABSTRACT

In this article, I adopt a structural approach to Russian soft power, switching focus from the supposed agent of power (Russia), towards the subjects of power (Ukrainians). I outline the applicability of this approach to empirical studies into soft power, demonstrating how soft power can be examined from bottom-up, discursively-focused perspectives.

The empirical analysis then traces how Ukrainians (do not) link their self-identities to discursive understanding of “Russia”. Reviewing recent insights into the relationship between soft power and affect, I argue that Ukrainians' cultural, historical and linguistic ties with Russia often lack necessary emotional force to generate meaningful soft power.

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Russian soft power has been subject to extensive academic and governmental scrutiny, especially in relation to Russia's aims of increasing its non-military influence in the post-Soviet space. Numerous studies have examined the soft power strategies and resources employed by the Russian state to improve its image abroad, and to further its foreign policy interests (for example: [Tsygankov, 2006](#); [Kudors and Pelnens, 2015](#); [Flavier, 2015](#)). The bulk of the extant literature suggests that while Russia possesses an extensive range of soft power resources, it is often unable to utilise these effectively in support of its foreign policy objectives ([Sergunin, 2016](#), p. 58; [Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016](#)). In this article, I do not fundamentally challenge this position. I do, however, address the salient question of *why* Russian soft power has been largely ineffective, especially in areas with ostensibly favourable historical, cultural and resource-based conditions.

Nowhere is this puzzle more apparent than the case of Ukraine, where Russia has attempted to activate its soft power potential through various cultural, diplomatic, economic and informational channels ([Bogomolov and Lytvynenko, 2012](#)). Additionally, as the Ukraine-specific literature attests, many Ukrainians share identity narratives which incorporate favourable views of Russia, the Russian people, the Russian language and Russian culture ([Korostelina, 2013](#)). Within such identificational processes, delineations between Ukrainian and Russian identities have often been blurred, mutable and complex. At the political level, competition between presidential candidates and political parties has often been pitched as a struggle between “Eurasian,” that is, more favourable towards cooperation with Russia, and “European” forces ([Kuzio, 2005](#), 35). While this demonstrates a level of contestation in Ukrainian identity politics, it also provides evidence of potentially fertile ground for Russian soft power within large sections of Ukrainian society. This is especially apparent if we bear in mind the oft-cited link between culture, identities and soft power ([Feklyunina, 2015](#)).

Recently, however, survey data and political and societal analyses have highlighted the perceptible alienation of Ukrainians towards the Russian state ([Kulyk, 2016](#); [Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2016a, b](#); [International Republican Institute, 2016](#); [IFES, 2014](#)), further reinforced by an increasing desire for European integration at the expense of integration with Russia ([Samakhvalov, 2015](#); [Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2016a, b](#)). This potential contradiction

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demands further scrutiny, not least because (as documented below) many Ukrainians have not entirely abandoned shared cultural and historical identities with Russia and the former Soviet Union. The prominent role of the Russian language, for example, appears to be less politically salient than one might expect, considering the increase in hostility towards Russia itself (Kulyk, 2016, p. 601).

Research which adopts a top-down, resource-focused approach to soft power, often skips past these issues, at times conflating manifestations of culture (including language) with soft power proper. Therefore, while the literature is able to pinpoint various weaknesses in Russia's institutionalisation, conceptualisation and implementation of soft power (Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016), there has been little systematic effort to explain sufficiently why Ukrainians themselves appear relatively immune to Moscow's soft power initiatives. Here, I argue that it is important to move the debate beyond the policies and practices of the Russian Federation, towards the crucial role of the "targets" of soft power.

Taking a bottom-up approach, the ensuing study therefore examines the (non-)effects of Russian soft power in Ukraine. Key to this analysis is the role of emotion, or affect, towards the actual functioning of Ukrainian identities, and their subsequent relationship with Russian soft power. Instead of viewing identities and cultural affinity as being intrinsically tied in with soft power, I argue that cultural proximity and overlapping identities with Russia do not necessarily lead to soft power on their own. Instead, it is important to examine the emotional trajectories that accompany identities.

Overall, data generated from focus group interviews in Kyiv are used to derive three key explanations for the relative weakness of Russian soft power in Ukraine: 1) The competing affective appeal of "Europe"; 2) The increasing salience of a Ukrainian identity which rejects close association with Russian narratives and aesthetics; and 3) The effects of Russia's perceived aggressive foreign policy and information campaign against Ukraine, which significantly undermine shared identificational attachments. This study therefore sheds light on the identificational attachments Ukrainians have towards Russia, but adds the crucial element of affect to this analysis. This, it is argued, helps to explain why shared cultural perspectives and practices do not necessarily equate into soft power.

1. A bottom-up approach to soft power

The literature has moved on considerably from Joseph Nye's original contribution (1990), and from his subsequent work which defined soft power as the ability to attract and persuade – in contradistinction to hard power which was the capability to coerce (2004). In Nye's (2011a, b) book (2011b), he expounds upon his theory by paying closer attention to the nature of power. Nye focuses upon the "three faces of power" now widely identified within the literature, that is, "inducing others to do what they otherwise would not do", "framing and setting agenda", and "shaping others' preferences", (2011b, pp. 90–94) setting out to demonstrate how each face has two dimensions – one coercive (hard power) and one based on attraction (soft power).

While these faces of power are important tools for the study of soft power, Nye neglects the "fourth face of power", largely influenced by the work of Michel Foucault (Digeser, 1992). The limitation of the first three faces of power is that power is understood in a relational sense (Lock, 2009, pp. 36–7), whereby one actor is able to exercise power over another either directly or indirectly. These approaches therefore give primacy to the agency of the actor who wishes to create power.

The fourth face of power, however, is attuned to the agency of the subject of power (Allen, 2002, pp. 134–136). Power, in this sense, can be understood as structural rather than relational. It is structural because power surrounds us and does not come from a single actor. Instead, actors live in complex social worlds and have to derive meanings from a range of potential sources (Foucault, 1982, p. 781). Power consequently proceeds from our interpretations of the world around us and our place within it.

This structural approach consequently opens important avenues for the study of soft power. However, it simultaneously challenges a number of Nye's core assumptions. Nye (2011a, p. 16) goes as far as suggesting that "the insights Foucault and other structuralists provide are purchased at too high a price in terms of conceptual complexity and abstraction." One of the biggest objections is that structuralist approaches obscure the role of agency within power relations, an issue that has been at the heart of scholarly debates into Russian soft power (Feklyunina, 2015, pp. 6–9). In the first three faces of power, attraction manifests itself through logical persuasion or "rational" appeals made by concrete actors. For the fourth face of power, power is dispersed and it is impossible to locate a single source of power. Despite criticisms, however, that Foucault leaves little space for human agency (Allen, 2002), the structural approach can help to focus attention on the agency of subjects who have some latitude to negotiate their own meanings and "truth". This, O'Hara (1992, pp. 134–6) argues, is increasingly apparent in Foucault's latter writings. Structuralist¹ approaches therefore focus on the sociolinguistic functions of language and the way that meanings are negotiated by a broad range of individual actors, that is, the subjects of power.

This subject-centred approach to agency also encourages thoughtful reconsideration of the nature of attraction. For Nye, soft power is defined by its capacity to be attractive rather than coercive. Attraction therefore lies at the heart of the concept. However, as Bially Mattern (2005) has pointed out, Nye's central explanations for attraction: attraction as natural and attraction as evidence-based reasoning, are both deficient and underdeveloped.² In both cases the problem centres on the assumption that reality and reason are fixed. In practice, though, "interlocutors often don't even share understandings of what

¹ For the sake of consistency, I use the term 'structuralist' to describe this broad approach throughout the paper. This is in line with Nye's use of the term.

² In fairness to Nye, his latter works hint at a more complex conceptualisation of attraction, even if this is never fully developed (Nye, 2009, p. 6).

counts as evidence, and thus, they cannot reason about it” (p. 586). Attraction therefore hinges upon personal subjectivities rather than concrete realities. In other words, attraction proceeds from an individual's understanding of reality rather than reality itself.

Bially Mattern's work leads us to recognise the importance of the subject of power. It also highlights the salience of subjective, personal identities. As Bially Mattern argues, personal identities are crucial in determining how individuals perceive, interpret and relate to external objects. Attraction is therefore intrinsically linked to sociolinguistic constructions of self-identity, very much in line with structuralist perspectives on soft power.

However, as Ty Solomon (2014) notes, if attraction proceeds from sociolinguistic constructions of the self, then what principle is able to bind particular discourses with specific identities? In other words, why do certain ideas become attractive to people with certain identities? Ty Solomon sets out to answer this conundrum by drawing on Laclau's (2005) work on affective investments. He argues that individuals create emotional investments “that bind subjects to their identities and particular kinds of discourses” (Solomon, 2014, 729). In this sense, individuals identify with images and narratives that have emotional resonance and which, in turn, tie their identity with those of larger groups. Affect, or emotion, therefore attaches “fixity of meaning” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 112) to identities that are created sociolinguistically. It is therefore important to examine the positive and negative emotions that individuals articulate and which link or decouple their own identities with/from those of external objects.

If we are to understand Russian soft power from an ideational and subject-centred perspective, it is important to bring these considerations together. From a structuralist perspective, power has long been understood in terms of the “social relations of constitution” (Barnett and Duvall, 2005), that is, the complex web of power relations which facilitate human agency. Attraction here is not defined solely by an external agent. Instead it is determined by individuals' self-identities, and how they position themselves within these social relations. Further, these identities are largely determined by emotional investments into discourses and narratives which resonate with their sense of self: what is referred to below as “the active self”. This, in effect, allows us to view agency from the perspective of the subject of power; this subject is able to decipher various social relations in terms that fit with his or her sense of self.

I therefore conceptualise affective investments as proxies for soft power, and as the fundamental moments of attraction necessary for soft power to operate. To clarify, this means that “Russian soft power” does not relate to the direct relational power Russia has over a given target audience. Instead, it represents the socially-constituted power of the concept “Russia”, and any discourses and narratives associated with this linguistic sign, as filtered through the experience of the human subject. Irrespective of what Russia “is” and “does”, two individuals may have vastly divergent emotional attitudes towards their own concept of Russia. This, it is argued, is the crux of soft power: determining the emotional meanings that “Russia” has among a given cohort.

2. Methodology

Despite conceptual advances in the literature on soft power, there remains a dearth of methodological reflection. In one of the few studies to explore this question, Roselle et al. (2014) conceptualise soft power in terms of strategic narratives and provide some useful guidance. Whereas Nye notes that soft power proceeds from values, culture, and policies (2008, p. 96), Roselle et al. (2014, p. 76) propose three levels of analysis that more usefully encompass the discourses that represent these attractive elements: international systems narratives, national narratives, and issue narratives.

It is possible to apply these categories to analysis of the active self, that is, how self-identities are constituted in relation to discourses of the wider world, to national space(s), and to specific social, political and economic issues. This broadens the scope of study away from the production of narratives, towards the important moment wherein human subjects interpret and negotiate the meaning of these discourses.

Inevitably, these fields overlap and it is crucial to observe such intersections. For example, Same-sex marriage is a potentially important issue narrative for various individuals. Sexuality, as with numerous other issues, can be closely linked with national identity (Nachescu, 2005). In turn, these issues can take on an international dimension because of the ways that they are framed internationally, as an aspect of a country's self-positioning. Affect should be seen as an important factor across all three narratives. Emotional attachments can anchor identities that either increase or reduce the salience of national, international or issue narratives. By examining how individuals (do not) tie their active self to certain discursive entities, it becomes possible to examine the affective salience of particular narrative forms.

Within current Ukrainian scholarship it is common to focus on large-scale, quantitative studies which provide a representative snapshot of public opinion (Kull, 2015). Recent survey data have been able to track reduced public support for Ukraine's inclusion in a customs union with Russia and membership of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU),³ while revealing increased support for European integration (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2016a, b; Kull, 2015; IFES, 2014). These surveys track important trends, but the quantitative data do not fully lend themselves to an analysis of affect, nor do they answer *why* individuals do or do not support such initiatives. Instead, it is necessary to generate rich, qualitative data that can be analysed alongside the existing quantitative survey data.

³ The Eurasian Economic Union officially came into existence on 1 January 2015. The EEU replaced the Customs Union that had existed since 1 January 2010.

As such, eighteen focus groups were organised in Kyiv from July–August 2014, comprised of 125 participants and representative of three age-groups (18–25, 26–39, and 40+).⁴ Six focus groups were conducted among each age cohort. Participants were asked directly and indirectly to comment on international, national, and issue narratives. Respondents were invited to note how they personally related to a number of political, territorial, cultural and historical constructs. This data was then analysed to note the affective connections that linked the active self to the stated opinions. Reflecting the linguistic fluidity and bilingualism of Ukraine's capital city, participants were free to speak in Russian or Ukrainian and often switched between the two languages.⁵

The data were coded according to statements relating to international, national and issue narratives and sub coded within each category (see [Appendix 1](#) for coding categories and frequencies). In order to obtain insight into normative affect, the coded statements were analysed to determine statements denoting affective investments, that is, linkages of narratives with the active self. Two cross-thematic codings were employed to help to capture the positive and negative alignments between respondents' responses and their attitudes towards Russia: "othering of Russia" and "communality with Russia".

The data was therefore not simply used to investigate respondents' perspectives on Russia. Instead, this research examines the emotional bonds that (do not) link these perspectives with those of their imagined self-identity. The ontological assumption of this research is that soft power will occur when there is a positive emotional pull towards Russia, not simply a sense of shared experience and cultural reference.

While the data were analysed and coded carefully (with multiple readings and revisions of codings), there are inevitably a number of limitations inherent in my use of focus group data. The respondents were divided into three age-groups to provide a degree of representativeness. However, the focus groups may suffer from some bias based on a snowballing method of sampling. The narrow geographical selection also means that this data does not represent the whole of Ukraine. It is acknowledged that a wider geographical breadth of research would be necessary in order to assess more fully the countrywide reception of Russian soft power in Ukraine ([Hudson, 2015](#)). Despite these limitations, the data confirmed trends identified in existing survey data (see above). As with qualitative data generally, the rich insights inevitably came at some representative expense.

3. Russia, the EU and Ukraine

Although this research primarily addresses the effects of Russian soft power, it is impossible to ignore Ukraine's wider geopolitical context, especially the discursive and political roles of "Europe" and the EU. As highlighted below, Ukrainians' emotional attachments towards Russia are often contingent on those towards various concepts of Europe. Simplistic accounts of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, however, tend to juxtapose a "soft", normatively-driven EU against a "hard", geopolitically-driven Russia ([Centre for International Studies, 2015](#)). The EU, for example, has often been described as a "normative power" for espousing values of "democracy, rule of law, social justice and respect for human rights" ([Manners, 2002](#), p. 240). For some observers, this could lead to the automatic assumption that while the EU generates soft power, Russia only possesses hard, military and resource-based power.

However, even before the so-called Ukrainian crisis, the popular binary between a "soft", normative EU and a "hard", geopolitical Russia had been heavily critiqued ([Avere, 2009](#)). As [Casier \(2013\)](#) points out, Russia also possess a set of potentially attractive normative values of its own. In recent years, for example, the Russian state has invested heavily in articulating "traditional" viewpoints that are linked with Slavic and Russian civilisational values and historical narratives, including collectivism (*sobornost'*), disdain for individualism and liberalism, and Orthodox faith ([Cheskin, 2016](#), pp. 178–80). For many people in Ukraine, these values may also have affective and aesthetic appeal and should not be dismissed out of hand. Victoria [Hudson \(2015, p. 7\)](#), for example, outlines Russia's civilisational discourse which presents "a protected place to spirituality, morality and tradition" bound by the concept of the "Russian World": a supra-national or civilisational-level tier of identity, defined ... on the basis of ethnicity, native language, religion, interest in Russia, or historical ties with the Russian Federation".

Additionally, the inconsistency of EU policy has led a number of scholars to question the notion of a normatively-driven EU. While the EU broadly pursues policies designed to strengthen democracy, human rights, rule of law and so on, observers also note that it is competing for power and influence in its "eastern neighbourhood" ([Kudors and Pelnens, 2015](#), p. 221; [Tolstrup, 2014](#)), therefore pursuing geopolitical goals ([Klinke, 2014](#), p. 571). It is consequently important to move beyond crude characterisations of a "soft", normative EU and a "hard", geopolitical Russia. This is all the more true for structuralist approaches, which fundamentally question the distinction between normative and geopolitical forms of power, seeing them instead as interrelated aspects of discursively-realised forms of reality.

There is a voluminous literature that has critically engaged with, and identified, the associated discourses and narratives of both the EU ([Nunes, 2011](#); [Wodak and Weiss, 2005](#)) and Russia ([Cheskin, 2016](#); [Kiseleva, 2015](#); [Flavier, 2015](#)), especially in relation to competing claims for power in their "shared neighbourhood". These analyses have been able to document many of the soft power resources and discourses at the disposal of both sides and can be usefully employed to examine the contours of the current (inter)national developments and tensions in Ukraine. While these studies provide important contextual

⁴ I am grateful to Maria Kondratuk, from the National University Kyiv-Mohyla Academy for expertly recruiting and administering the focus groups.

⁵ I am grateful to Galyna Semenyshyn for her help with Ukrainian-Russian translations.

backgrounds for this research, they do not explain the receptive impact of soft power resources and discourses among target audiences. While not denying their importance, I am less interested here in Russian soft power strategies. Instead, I focus on the affective and ideational messages that filter through to human subjects, regardless of the original intentions of external agents.

4. Data analysis

The data demonstrated many instances where the active self of Ukrainian respondents was positively linked with discourses that embraced both Europe/the EU on the one hand, and Russia/the Soviet Union/the Slavic world on the other. At times these positions were complementary, at others exclusive. Overall, the data confirms trends identified within the extant literature (Kulyk, 2016; Hudson, 2015) and in ongoing survey data (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2016a, b; Kull, 2015; IFES, 2014), that political and economic alignment with Russia is in relative decline among Ukrainians, who are ever more likely to support orientation towards the EU and away from Russia. This is despite the significant core of ongoing support for integration with the Russian-led Customs Union/Eurasian Economic Union.

4.1. Russia's strong soft power potential

Despite the overall weakness of Russia's soft power, Russia remained a positive, affective pole of attraction for a number of respondents. Especially within the two older age-groups, participants often shared active identification with internationally-shared Russian and Slavic values such as respect for tradition and family values: "I like our Slavic traditions and values ... Yes, these were the accepted family values for Ukraine and for Russia." (Female, 26–39).

These respondents demonstrated clear affective investments into cultural norms, values and practices associated with a joint space that encompasses Russia. For many older respondents (especially among the oldest age-group), there was an observable overlap between perceptions of their (national) self and transnational (Slavic/Soviet) identities: "In the main we're like Russians – Slavs first and foremost. As you said, it's in our genes. So, whichever way you look at it, we're far more different from Europe than from Russia." (Male, 26–39).

In many such instances, in-group constructions of "we" included Russians and Ukrainians as a part of the same imagined nation. The affective ties that underpinned these perceptions often centred on historical and primordial narratives, highlighting a shared heritage: "For us – Belorussia, Ukraine, and Russia, a level of spirituality has developed over a thousand years ... [In Europe] they have a different mentality." (Female, 26–39).

Previous research has analysed and highlighted the existence of Russia's discourses of pan-Slavism. Mikhail Suslov (2012), for example, documents how such narratives aim to create emotional bonds with a geopolitical space that extends beyond the confines of the contemporary Russian Federation. Through an examination of the receptive decoding of these narratives by the target audience, we can see how certain individuals have invested emotionally into personal and group identities. Subsequently, the data allows us to track how these affective investments can lead to direct support for Russia's foreign policy actions.

For example, Elena,⁶ a woman in the 40+ age-group, noted how, "we're Slavs [Ukrainians and Russians] and, no matter what, we need to always unite." Active identification with shared Russian narratives of culture, traditions, history and a distinctive identity (*samobytnost'*), appears to lead Elena towards direct support of Russia's foreign policy, including its controversial incorporation of Crimea: "If Ukraine can't protect the rights of its inhabitants then let Russia interfere. I don't see anything bad in that, or when they defend the Russian language." It also leads Elena to deride European values and the EU more generally: "European culture ... is a general greyish mass ... National culture, traditions, values, identities all disappear into this mass."

For many of the older respondents, their affective ties with Russia also stem from their lived experience in the Soviet Union, towards which there was clear evidence of emotional attachment. For these people, the Soviet Union represented a period of economic stability and contrasted to the post-Soviet experience of Ukrainian independence. In this respect, affective investment into national Ukrainian identities, as well as broader European identities, was greatly reduced: "In the period since we've been independent, I don't see any real progress in technology, science, and so on ... We should have continued the way we were and developed - like our parents taught us, right?" (Female, 40+).

Echoing the findings of Victoria Hudson's (2015, p. 10) research, it was also possible to see value alignment with Russia along the issue narrative axis. A prominent issue narrative from the focus groups was same-sex marriage and attitudes towards "non-traditional relationships". Analysis of Russia's domestic (Wilkinson, 2014) and internationally-projected discourse (Cheskin, 2016, pp. 170–81) shows that Russia's ruling elites have sought political legitimacy through the use of what Valerie Sperling calls "the power of sex" (2015, p. 1). Not only does President Putin present a wilfully masculine, or "machismo" image, the regime has also sponsored popular articulations of "traditional" (and therefore "Russian") family values. The clearest examples of this can be seen in the country's so-called "anti-gay laws". The federal law of 2013, for example, officially prohibits "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations to minors" (Wilkinson, 2014, pp. 365–68), thereby connecting Russia's perceived traditions with concrete issue narratives towards same-sex relationships. Within the

⁶ All real names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

focus groups, respondents who generally had negative views towards Russia often expressed support for Russia's stance on this specific issue. One respondent, who had previously been highly critical of Russia, noted: "In a way I even agree with the Russians ... I think that Europe oversteps the mark ... Europeans are now starting to brag about their culture and their traditions. I think they've spun it in a way they shouldn't have." (Male, 26–39).

While the issue of LGBT rights was contested among all age cohorts, it demonstrates possible avenues for the continued salience of Russian soft power in Ukraine. Not only can this issue help to consolidate "Slavic" (traditional, family) values, it is also juxtaposed against the attitudes and practices of "Europe". Indeed, people who dismissed European values often did so based on the premise that European norms contradicted traditional Russian and Ukrainian family values: "The good thing about Ukraine and Russia is that family ties are still highly valued and people understand that. Not like in Europe where people live for themselves." (Female, 26–39).

A number of individuals therefore expressed deeply entrenched commonality with Russia, linking their active self with various national, international and issue narratives. This was often expressed in terms of positive emotional bonds, signifying the presence of Russian soft power. At the same time, commonalities were also expressed negatively. In such instances the "we" in-group simultaneously served as the derided "other":

- (Natalia) I don't want to offend our Ukrainian and Russian people, but our nation is lazy. People here don't want to do anything and yet still receive a good wage. –
- (Moderator) Ukrainians and citizens of Russia?
- (Natalia) Yes, Slavs. (26–29)

From 170 coded statements denoting commonality with Russia, 67 (39.4%) were simultaneously coded as othering Russia (there were a total of 346 coded instances denoting othering of Russia – see [Appendix 1](#)). This suggests that many identity narratives that could be described as potential resources of Russian soft power, often lack the crucial factor of attraction for Kyivan residents. This demonstrates that while soft power can be closely entwined with collective identities ([Feklyunina, 2015](#)), this linkage is deeply contingent on affect. In these documented instances, the respondents identified their active selves with Russia on many levels. However, affective investments into these identities were often absent. In order to explain this absence, the data pointed to the need to examine competing international (European) discourses, and to see how they align emotionally with national (Ukrainian) discourses of the idealised self.

4.2. *The competing appeal of European forms of soft power*

When asked to identify "European values", the majority of participants expressed positive views about the normative concept of Europe. Despite some negative views, participants repeatedly identified rule of law, freedom, democracy, economic prosperity, lack of corruption, and dignified living conditions as European values (see also survey data from [IFES, 2014](#), p. 16). In terms of positioning their active self and national identities towards these "European" values, participants often adopted dualistic discursive strategies. On the one hand they placed their actual national experience alongside that of Russia, as the antithesis of European values and practice, citing corruption, poor economic conditions, and lack of democratic development. On the other hand, many participants were keen to align their active self with these aforementioned European values, positing that Ukraine was striving to be more European and more civilised than Russia both in terms of people's mentality and day-to-day realities: "Russia and Ukraine, in principle, are on one level and Europe, in terms of civilisation, is more developed, and their values are more developed." (Male, 26–39).

In terms of issue narratives, the respondents often expressed understanding that the economic models of the EU were superior to those found in Ukraine or Russia: "In the USSR the economy worked by extracting something, turning it into metal, for example, and then selling it; It's how a banana republic works. It's like that in Russia now, and in Ukraine. I'd like to think that all these developments are pushing us closer to Europe." (Male, 26–29).

Economics has long been understood as a source of conventional political power ([Waltz, 1979](#), p. 131) as economic resources provide tangible capital alongside institutional influence ([Nye, 2011b](#), pp. 52–80). While economic success can also have a soft, attractive element, the relationship between soft power and economics is not always rational, or based on material self-interest in the sense that classical economics would uphold ([Vriend, 1996](#), p. 265). The soft power of economics also rests upon the affective underpinnings that make an economic system attractive or not by linking it with visions of the active self.

The respondents, for example, widely acknowledged that Russians generally enjoyed higher material standards of living than their Ukrainian counterparts. Russian markets were also cited as important to Ukraine. At the same time, while the older cohorts sometimes conceptualised these ties positively, the younger cohort rarely expressed explicit emotional attachment to Russia economically. Contrastingly, understandings of European economic organisation and standards of living were often tied in with emotional attachments to freedom, dignity, rule of law and so on, which in turn were tied to understandings of their active self: "Moscow lives well ... Everywhere else [in Russia] lives poorly, really poorly – in poverty. In Europe there's freedom which is wonderful. There's development which is wonderful. We have an open heart and a yearning for freedom which is also wonderful." (Female, 18–25).

Issue narratives such as economic policies are therefore also implicitly tied in with international narratives of Europe, and to affective associations with “freedom”, “democracy” etc. Many respondents therefore displayed reduced emotional attachment towards Russia and its associated civilisational values, even when they were considered as fundamental aspects of their current identity and experience.

As a result, issue narratives such as freedom of speech, the political organisation of Ukraine, and economic policies (including anti-corruption policies) were given additional affective force by being aligned with international systems narratives that included Ukraine within an idealised, hoped-for European identity. Importantly, this alignment often necessitated a rejection of Russia as a valid model for the attainment of these goals. This commonly resulted in Russia being excluded from participants’ emotional attachments to shared civilisational spaces.

4.3. *The increasing salience of Ukrainian identity*

The developing (though not universally-accepted) connection between perceived European values and Ukrainians’ increasing affective investments into European identities also has implications for (or is stimulated by) national narratives of the self, that is, what it means to be a Ukrainian. As the voluminous literature on Ukrainian identity attests, processes of nation-building have been especially fraught within a country initially lacking its own clearly defined history (von Hagen, 1995) and dealing with complex legacies of the Soviet and Tsarist imperial past (Kappeler, 2014).

There is some debate surrounding the social salience of ethnic Ukrainian identities compared to civic national identities (Shulman, 2004; Korostelina, 2013). However, it is widely accepted that the narrative form of strongly articulated Ukrainian (as opposed to Slavic or Soviet) identities is largely based on the premise that, “Ukraine is not Russia”. Indeed, this was the title of the book written (in Russian) by former Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma (2003). As a result, within the focus groups, affective investments into clear Ukrainian identities and their associated narratives and aesthetics usually came at the expense of affective ties with Russia: “In the 20 years of [Ukrainian] independence [*nezalezhnosti*],⁷ a young generation has grown up who were not born in the Soviet Union. They’ve already started to think freely for themselves a bit. So they’re really used to freedom ... not like in Russia where they tell you what to do and when to go to the toilet.” (Female, 26–29).

International narratives of Russia therefore play an integral role in the articulation of Ukrainian identities. Kataryna Wolczuk (2000, p. 676) also notes how “the idea of Europe and, more generally, the West plays a pivotal role in “nation-building” in Ukraine”. As a result, international narratives of Europe are often positively aligned to national narratives of Ukraine, even if they have previously been largely declarative: “Ukrainian values are more embedded now. They’re developing on the right track because, as I see it, it’s the way we’re heading. We’re heading towards European values.” (Female, 18–25).

Prime examples were found in responses to Ukraine’s so-called “Euromaidan” protest. The Maidan protests initially focused on President Yanukovich’s refusal to sign an Association Agreement with the EU, but the demands soon turned towards domestic issues of political and economic reform (Onuch, 2014, p. 47). While the European element of the Maidan protests was therefore complex, there is no doubt that the discourse of Europe was an important symbolic and aesthetic element within the protest movement. Respondents held divergent opinions of Euromaidan, but many agreed that it signified a rebirth of the Ukrainian nation and a watershed moment in the development of Ukrainian national identity. A majority of respondents supported Euromaidan. Many participants expressed clear emotional investments into the events of Maidan and their effect on their personal identities as Ukrainians: “I think that the phrase “we went to the Maidan in search of Europe, but found Ukraine” is really pertinent now.” (Male, 40+).

While the 2004 “Orange Revolution” was symbolised by the neutral orange colour (a deliberate, political strategy of the political opposition, spearheaded by Viktor Yushchenko), the Euromaidan protests were filled with patriotic symbols of Ukrainian statehood (for example, the national anthem, the blue and yellow national flag and the national “trident” coat of arms). These national symbols appear to have significant emotional resonance with Ukrainians and are used to distinguish Ukrainian identities from Russian ones: “Judging by what we saw on the Maidan, when millions of people sang the national anthem and prayed, even children in nurseries, it was very heartening. And many people envied us, including even Russia.” (Female, 40+).

While emotional attachments to Ukrainian national symbols were evident across all three age-groups, they were most evident among the youngest age cohort who were most likely to describe themselves as patriots of Ukraine, and who were least likely to claim shared forms of identity with Russia, the Russian World, the Slavic world, or the Soviet Union. For these individuals, the active self, understood in national terms, corresponded most clearly with international narratives of Europe and diverged away from international narratives associated with Russia and the Slavic world.

4.4. *The undermining effects of Russian perceived aggression against Ukraine*

While this research has highlighted the continued presence of a series of identifying linkages with Russia, the analysis also demonstrates that these were not always expressed positively. In fact, the majority of references to Russia were negative, and

⁷ Although this respondent spoke in Russian, the word independence was spoken in Ukrainian, indicating a Ukrainisation (and de-Russification) of the concept of independence for this individual.

used predominantly to create a meaningful other with which to anchor active identities. Additionally, there was relatively little support for Ukrainian economic integration with Russia and even less for political integration. Notably, the majority of participants were highly critical of, and often very angry about, Russia's actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

Joseph Nye (2008, p. 96) argues that “cultural soft power can be undercut by policies that are seen as illegitimate” insofar as soft power rests upon three key resources: culture, political values and foreign policy. Certainly, this research finds evidence that Ukrainians continue to possess affective investments into culture and political values associated with Russia. Analysis of the third category – foreign policy, however, reveals stark limitations of Russian soft power in contemporary Ukraine, especially when examined in relation to affective investments.

Among the youngest cohort, criticism of Russia's annexation of Crimea was almost unanimous and respondents expressed singularly negative attitudes towards Russia's President and political establishment: “Putin and [Foreign Minister] Lavrov make all the decisions ... I don't like how they talk about Ukraine and I don't like how they discuss the situation with Crimea, or how they criticise all Ukrainians in general.” (Male, 18–25).

For many of the respondents, Russia's actions were inherently anti-Ukrainian. Additionally, participants were struck by the perceived hatred and contempt that was directed towards Ukraine and Ukrainians in the Russian media. There was a clear sense that recent events had polarised Ukrainian and Russian identities and that Russia's portrayal of Ukraine had served to demarcate “us” versus “them”. For example, one respondent (Male, 26–39) noted how his brother, who lived in Russia, had been labelled a fascist and “benderite” [*benderovets*]⁸ by Russians who believed what they saw on television. Similar stories of encountering Russian, anti-Ukrainian “propaganda” were recalled by many participants across all three age-groups.

Predictably, the effect of this is to lessen affective ties with Russia, further demarcating Ukrainian and Russian identities. Among the oldest age-group, participants explained how recent events had ruptured their understandings of their relationship with Russia. Whereas previously they had felt strong affinity with Russia, many were starting to question this

In the past, for example, it definitely seemed to me that we were, as they say, “brothers”, with Russia. But now when I look at the situation I don't understand it ... It turns out that [Russians] are just genetically preconfigured to have imperial ambitions. It turns out that we were either a younger brother or some sort of vassal. In fact we were never their equals. (Male, 40+)

For many of the older respondents, it appeared very difficult to grasp how Ukrainians and Russians had gone from brothers to enemies so rapidly. Many of them blamed President Putin personally for this and highlighted continued links with the people of Russia as distinct from the political establishment. In terms of political preferences for Ukraine, many now looked towards Europe instead of a customs union with Russia: “If we take Russia, then in spirit a Russian is my brother. But imperial Russia is an empire. The customs union [with Russia] is a situation where the majority of activities are dictated by strongest economy – Russia. The European Union represents parity.” (Male, 40+).

Other people who expressed close emotional attachments to Russia, and who did not necessarily favour European integration, nevertheless felt highly conflicted by ongoing events in Ukraine: “Still, Europe is far away and we're still very different from them. With Russia we have so many mixed families ... I don't feel any difference between Ukrainians and Russians ... And then there's what's going on at the moment: “you're no longer my brother”. Well how can you make sense of that?” (Female, 26–39).

This again points to a failure to convert shared identities into soft power. The data shows how, notwithstanding long-standing affective investments into shared identities and narratives with Russia, recent policies and discourses of the Russian state (or at least the reception of these) have led many respondents to question their active self and their political preferences.

5. Conclusions

This research has been used to demonstrate the practical, empirical utility of studying the impact of soft power through an examination of affect, applying a Foucauldian approach to power. As the analysis shows, empirical studies of affect must pay close attention to cultural context. Affective investments, although mutable, often have long cultural histories and draw on specific social, political, cultural and economic narratives. These can be understood as soft power resources insofar as they all contribute to the overall milieu of structural power. Much of the IR literature on Russia has embraced “sociology of knowledge” approaches, arguing that existing IR paradigms are deeply rooted in the specific cultural context of their dominant authors (Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2007; Shin, 2009). If we wish to understand the bottom-up reception of soft power, it is important to give space to these factors. When recent theoretical insights into soft power, notably work on aesthetics, affect and narratives, are combined with cultural and historical analysis, it is possible to start to assess how soft power operates within target audiences.

Admittedly, the limited geographical confines of this research and the inherent epistemological limitations of focus-group research necessitate some caution. Nevertheless, the qualitative data help to shed light on the complex processes by which Ukrainians may develop, create and reconfigure affective investments into various national, international and issue narratives. Such affective investments were taken as proxies for soft power. The main findings accordingly suggest that Russia has considerable soft power potential in Ukraine, especially among older Ukrainians. Many of the respondents shared

⁸ Reference to followers of controversial Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera, leader of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. For some Ukrainian nationalists and patriots Bandera represents a national hero, who fought for Ukrainian freedom. For others he is a Nazi collaborator and epitome of evil. For a concise overview of the controversies surrounding Bandera's legacy see Liebich and Myshlovska, 2014.

transnational (Soviet and Slavic) identities and demonstrated clear emotional ties with a transnational space shared with Russia. Additionally, across all age-groups, many respondents articulated social and issue narratives which had potential to be positively linked with preferences for social and political integration with Russia.

Despite this potential, however, the evidence also suggests that Russian soft power is generally weak among this particular target audience. It was possible to provide a three-fold explanation for this. Firstly, Russian soft power is hampered by the emerging development of stronger Ukrainian national identities that seek to detach themselves from identification with Russia. Within my sample, affective investments into emerging Ukrainian identities were most apparent amongst the younger generation. These individuals have experienced fewer political, social and economic ties with Russia and the Soviet Union and display less emotional attachment to a shared normative space with Russia.

Secondly, in conjunction with these developments, European identities have increasingly been used to facilitate the demarcation of Ukrainian and Russian identities. The evidence suggests that emerging, normative associations with Europe therefore reduce Russian soft power, as they provide alternative national, international and issue narratives with clear affective attraction.

The final factor reducing Russian soft power in Ukraine is perceptions of Russia's political actions towards the country. Even among older age-groups, recent developments in Crimea and eastern Ukraine have had a clear impact on perceptions of Russia. The reception of Russia's information campaign against Ukraine clearly shows the limitations of Russia's approach to soft power. As previous research has documented, official Russian foreign policy does not conceptualise soft power as a force for attraction. Instead, soft power is primarily understood as a means to project geopolitical and domestic aims through non-military means (Kiseleva, 2015; Persson, 2014). As a result, while aggressive media messages portraying a decadent West and a fascistic Ukraine have been useful to buttress domestic support, they have also potentially weakened affective ties with other audiences outside of Russia.

Admittedly, the exclusive focus on the forth face of power is limiting in its scope and potentially misses out recent key insights into the workings of soft power which see the importance of a complex spectrum of interrelated forms of power (Rothman, 2011). For example, the observation that Russian state policy has directly undermined soft power, hints at the primacy of the state in determining soft power outcomes. Structural notions of power highlight its diffuse nature. However, this does not mean that power cannot be more concentrated in certain social and political institutions such as the state. This research has largely side-stepped the issue of productive agency, by instead focusing on the constitutive moment where discourses are interpreted by their audiences. This presents a number of limitations that need further investigation. While it is useful to note the role audiences play in creating (not simply being recipients of) soft power, it raises questions about how, and to what extent, state and non-state actors can trigger changes in affective investments and the structural formation of power. Another issue is the relative position of the audience within these complex relationships of power. This research was conducted among "ordinary" members of the public; Echoing Feklyunina (2015, p. 4), it is appropriate for future research to ask "which audiences matter?"

While these issues are significant, they have been placed outside the narrower scope of this research. Instead, the data have been analysed to demonstrate how affect can be usefully examined methodologically in relation to soft power. The structural focused approach allows us to scrutinise the narrative mechanisms by which soft power operates at the more micro level of analysis. It is sincerely hoped that the rich data generated here contradict Nye's scepticism of post-structuralist approaches to soft power (2011a, p. 16).

A final point is that soft power is never static. While the evidence here points to increased affective investment into European identities, it does not follow that common perceptions of European values and their utility are unquestioned, or that they will continue to take root in Ukraine. In many respects, within this small sample, emotional attachment to "Europe" appears to have grown in direct proportion to the fall in emotional attachment to Russia. However, this study provides a clear example of the volatility of soft power; even when there is a significant reserve of potential soft power and affect, this can all too easily be undercut by developments that directly challenge the subject's perception of his or her active self. Moreover, the very moment wherein affective investments "bind subjects to their identities" (Solomon, 2014, 729), necessarily serves to transform discursive forms, feeding back into never-ending circular relations of power. As a result, soft power, and especially Russian soft power, remains enduringly elusive.

Appendix 1. Indicative coding and frequency of qualitative data

Table 1.1
International narratives.

	Coding Frequency	Communality with Russia	Othering of Russia
United States of America	48	5	15
NATO	30	3	9
EU and Europe	336	65	104
Customs Union/EEU	30	9	17
Russian World	9	1	8
Russia's actions in Crimea and Donbas	139	15	72
Russia	530	147	336
Ukraine between "east" and "west"	131	9	20

Table 1.2
Issue narratives.

	Coding Frequency	Communality with Russia	Othering of Russia
Language	125	8	42
Maidan Protests	102	3	19
Federalisation	29	2	5
Corruption	98	23	31
Economics	207	47	58
Values	245	69	88
Sexuality and Family	87	28	17
Freedom and Democracy	89	11	50
Media	85	6	58

Table 1.3
National narratives.

	Coding Frequency	Communality with Russia	Othering of Russia
Ukraine in General	242	42	57
Slavs	30	12	19
History and Memory	70	32	39
Sovereignty and Independence	133	20	59
Ukrainian Values	136	37	34
Youth and Generational Change	31	10	9
Rule of Law and Corruption in Ukraine	53	15	13

Table 1.4
Cross-thematic coding

	Coding Frequency
Communality with Russia	170
Othering of Russia	346

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