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Moscow’s Soft Power Strategy

ANDREI P. TSYGANKOV

Russia’s leaders recently have expressed a determination to develop soft power—international attractiveness—and to rely on it increasingly in their foreign policies. Moscow’s soft power in fact is already considerable, particularly in Eurasia. Even so, this strategy faces important obstacles and international competition. At home, the Kremlin has much work ahead to develop nonmilitary aspects of its power and influence—

Soft Power Revisited

Second in a series

economic, institutional, and cultural. Externally, Russia’s development partly depends on its acceptance by the outside world, and it is imperative that Moscow better explain its objectives and the means of achieving them. With a clearer vision and a confident moral authority, Russia would be less likely to rely on coercion and tough talk in defending its interests abroad.

ENDURING COMPETITION

When Harvard’s Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power in 1990, he meant to highlight the growing prominence of American values and the importance of sharing them for economic and political success in an increasingly globalized environment. To Nye, soft power meant the ability to influence others by example, that is, through attraction and co-optation, rather than coercion or inducement. Because of its reliance on example, soft power operates in a non-zero-sum fashion by encouraging cooperation among states and discouraging the kind of competition that produces winners and losers. In addition, it has the ability to speak to people and societies, rather than to governments and elites.

Recent events have fundamentally challenged this liberal perspective on what the world is and

how it ought to function. Instead of an increased and American-defined policy convergence, new cleavages and divergences in international relations have emerged. Globalization has highlighted poverty gaps and socioeconomic divisions. Arms races endure, and new areas of violence and lawlessness have appeared. Globalization has encompassed destabilizing new cultural formulations and intensified old ethnic and nationalist animosities. Many nations have eschewed the protection and benefits of US hegemony, seeking regional arrangements and allies instead. Structurally, we still live in a familiar world of US primacy, characterized by American military predominance and global superiority in political, economic, and cultural dimensions. But the international environment is moving away from its US-centeredness; it is entering the uncharted waters of what Fareed Zakaria has called the “post-American world.” In sum, globalization has revealed a competitive side.

American soft power, thus, retains its non-zero-sum character primarily among those willing to submit to policy directions defined and promulgated by Washington. Others with distinct cultural values and foreign policy interests increasingly develop and promote soft power of their own. This is reflected both in recent developments in international relations theory and in various state policies. Theory appears to be moving away from universal pretensions, as Chinese, Russians, and others discuss national schools and traditions of geopolitics and foreign policy. Europeans promote good governance; China champions “global harmony” and regional hegemony; Moscow advocates sovereignty in international affairs.

Russia, among others, feels threatened by democratization and by regime changes in the Middle East, to which the Kremlin responds by promoting Russia-specific political and economic values. Nye has criticized China and Russia for not appreciating the non-zero-sum and the non-state nature of

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soft power, likening their soft power projects to government propaganda—yet both nations continue to believe in balancing against American values. They remain skeptical of the liberal recommendation of cooperation in what they view as an inherently hierarchical world, especially given Nye's own argument that soft power "is not just a matter of ephemeral popularity; it is a means of obtaining outcomes the United States wants."

APPEALING TO SOME

Moscow's soft power is strong and limited at the same time. Historically, Russia has been guided by Christian ideals, trans-ethnic imperial principles, and the model of a strong state (*derzhava*) in domestic and international affairs. Soviet ideology transformed the national values by replacing Christianity and autocracy with beliefs in communism and single-party rule. Today's system of values is still in the process of being formed, but it is increasingly based on reviving pre-Soviet, rather than Soviet, Russian ideas. These values have enjoyed strong appeal in Eurasia. In the process of building their empire, Russians relied not only on coercion, but also co-optation and coexistence. Not only Slavs, but many Muslims too were willing to submit to the empire's general direction. From the era of Catherine the Great, the Russian empire developed special ties with Islam, and the state even served as an arbitrator in disputes between Muslims from the Volga River to Central Asia.

At the same time, Russia's soft-power appeal historically has been limited in several respects. First, with the exception of the relatively brief Soviet period, Russian values were geographically local, not universal, and were based on Eastern Christian ideals predominantly popular in Eurasian and East European regions. After the fall of Byzantium in the fifteenth century, Russia emerged as the center of Eastern Christianity and fought a number of wars with the Ottoman Empire to defend Orthodox Christians in the Crimea and the Balkans. Second, after the rise of Western powers, Russian economic performance was more commonly associated with the semi-periphery than with the core of the international system. Moscow had to play catch-up, and its ability to attract others suffered in the process. Third, as a vast continental empire, Russia faced multiple challenges to its security and had to apply the tools of hard, rather than soft, power to defend its borders.

After the Soviet disintegration, Russia's soft power suffered setbacks during the instability of

the 1990s, but quickly recovered in the 2000s, manifesting itself in cultural values, economic interdependence, and political legitimacy in Eurasia. In the cultural sphere, Russian soft power continues to stem from shared history and institutions. The new post-Soviet states had shared external borders, fought the same enemies, and were subject to similar linguistic and cultural policies. Whereas the Baltics were independent during the interwar years and preserved a sense of national identity even while part of the Soviet empire, other republics' experience with statehood was too short and fragmented to develop a sufficiently strong sense of cultural distinctiveness. Russian was the common second language in non-Russian republics and the mother tongue of many professionals and politicians. Today it remains the common language uniting the former republics. The bonds across republics are strongest among elites, many of whom were educated in the same universities, worked in the same institutions, and served together in the Soviet army.

Economically, Russian soft power stems from the fact that the republics were linked together in what Soviet planners called a "single economic complex" that was anchored by Russia. The republics were directed by Moscow to trade primarily with one another, rather than with countries outside the USSR. International trade and investment networks from the Soviet era continue to facilitate commerce by keeping transaction costs low. Since the breakup, Russia has been slow to withdraw its energy subsidies from the former Soviet states, and all of them have taken advantage of this discount. Transit states, such as the Baltics, Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus, profited by reselling considerable portions of Russian supplies to European consumers at the world market price. Today, millions of labor migrants from the poorer republics—Moldova, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, for example—earn their livings in Russia because there are not enough jobs at home.

In the political realm, Russia has served as a state-building example in the region. Although it is in no position to offer global competition to the United States' liberal democratic ideas, Russia has been perceived by many in the region as generally successful in accomplishing other state-building tasks, such as providing citizens with order, basic social services, and protection against external threats. Russia's system of "managed democracy" is routinely criticized in the West as disrespectful of human rights, but it is viewed differently

elsewhere. Ordinary people and many politicians from Central Asia to Ukraine often rate Russia's current leaders higher than their own. In 2011, a Gallup poll revealed that 61 percent of those living in the former Soviet region approve of the Russian leadership's performance, whereas its worldwide median approval across 104 countries was only 27 percent.

Even outside the region, the influence of Russia's state-building experience is considerable. A 2008 report by the European Council on Foreign Relations noted a rise in Russia's ability to attract votes at the United Nations since the late 1990s, from around 50 percent to 76 percent of all votes, while support for the European Union and United States fell from over 70 percent and 75 percent to around 50 percent and 30 percent, respectively.

Externally, Russia has been attractive to others because Moscow has often used its dominant resources in ways that benefit the near abroad. The disappearance of the Soviet Union created a security vacuum that contributed to several violent conflicts in the Russian periphery. Russia's neighbors, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus, called for Russian assistance because there was no other entity able and willing to intervene. With the exception of the military conflict with Georgia in August 2008, Moscow has sought to play a diplomatic role in the region through multilateral security organizations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In the process, Russia has also acted to further its own interests, including the preservation of stability on its borders, economic opportunities, and ties with ethnic Russians living in neighboring states.

Moscow is likely to continue to experience difficulties with developing its soft power.

VYING VISIONS

Russia's soft power in Eurasia has been challenged from various directions. Western politicians frequently accuse Moscow of "imperialism" while seeking to replace Russia's soft power with influence of their own. US-based ideas of democratization and the EU-generated project of a "good neighborhood" have acted as potential constraints on Moscow's soft power reach. China too has played an increasingly influential role in Central Asia via the SCO and commercial expansion. The global financial crisis made China's economic

influence on the region especially pronounced. China's trade with Central Asia today exceeds that of Russia, and Beijing is increasingly successful in tapping into energy reserves and winning new contracts in the region. Finally, two core Muslim states—Iran and Turkey—influence the areas around the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, respectively. Iran has tried to make the most of its Shiite, and Turkey its Sunni, cultural capital, while both have tried to capitalize on their status as hubs for energy pipelines connecting Eurasia, the Middle East, and Europe.

In response to these developments, Moscow has begun to advocate a vision of Russia as a civilization in a world of competitive cultural visions. In 2008, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov became the first Kremlin official to argue that "competition is becoming truly global and acquiring a civilizational dimension; that is, the subject of competition now includes values and development models." Since his campaign to return to the presidency in 2012, Vladimir Putin too has adopted the discourse of Russia's distinctiveness and national values. In a

meeting with Russia's ambassadors, he called on them to actively influence international relations by relying on tools of lobbying and soft power. In an address last year to Russia's parliament, in which he warned of new demographic

and moral threats to the nation, Putin declared that "in the twenty-first century, amid a new balance of economic, civilizational, and military forces, Russia must be a sovereign and influential country. . . . We must be and remain Russia."

Even though Russia feels threatened by the West's human rights rhetoric and is concerned by US and European international policies, Moscow's civilizational idea is not necessarily anti-Western. Such an interpretation of Russia's soft power tack is premature, because the Kremlin has yet to deviate from its standard line of preserving strong relations with Europe and the United States in a globalizing world. Importantly, a Foreign Policy Concept signed by Putin in February 2013 describes the world in terms of a "rivalry of values and development models within the framework of the universal principles of democracy and the market economy." Faced with external competition, the Kremlin is preoccupied with reviving internal foundations for Russia's soft power appeal. By adopting the language of a distinct civilization,

the Kremlin is trying to articulate a system of internal values as a latent element of soft power.

Regionally and internally, Russia's soft power stratagem also represents a response to fears of radicalized and militant Islam. The recent destabilization of the Middle East and an uncontrolled flow of migrants of non-Slavic nationalities threaten Russia's domestic peace with terrorist violence in the Caucasus and inter-ethnic riots across the country. The internal significance of the emerging civilization rhetoric is reflected in a new official nationalities strategy signed by Putin in December 2012, which reintroduced the country as a "unique socio-cultural civilizational entity formed of the multi-people Russian nation."

In the service of these ideological trends, Moscow has established an infrastructure to influence the formation of Russia's image in the world. The Russia Today television network is now the third after BBC News and Sky News in terms of numbers of viewers globally. Several state-supported foundations and the Russian Orthodox Church have been promoting linguistic and spiritual relations with Russia across the post-Soviet region. More recently, the Kremlin instituted Rosotrudichestvo (Russian cooperation) as an organization for connecting to people in Eurasia with ties to Russia by distributing foreign aid and creating "optimal conditions for promoting Russian business, science, education, and culture." Plans call for increasing the organization's annual budget from \$62.5 million to \$297 million.

THE EURASIA STRATEGY

Russia's influence in the former Soviet region has grown steadily since the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s. Despite energy conflicts with Ukraine and the use of force against Georgia in August 2008, Moscow views regional dominance in terms of soft power, rather than direct control over its neighbors' domestic and international priorities. By capitalizing on its soft power, Russia has been able to offset competitive influences and even initiate regional integration under its leadership. Other powerful states have revealed their limited interest in Eurasia or limited ability to focus on influencing the region. The United States is beginning to recognize its overextension in the world. The EU is absorbed with its economic problems. China's Eurasian reach is also limited, given

Beijing's relatively peripheral geographic location and its dearth of energy reserves and cultural capital. Iran and Turkey's ambitions in Eurasia are limited by competition for influence in the larger Middle East.

This leaves Russia a critically important regional power. Thanks to high oil prices, Moscow has strengthened its presence in neighboring economies and contributed to reversals of the "color revolutions" in Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia, which the Kremlin viewed as dangerous for Russia and destabilizing for the region. In all three countries, anti-Kremlin governments were replaced by ones in favor of stronger ties with Russia. Following these changes, Russia negotiated new terms for its influence. In Ukraine, Moscow negotiated an extension of the basing lease for Russia's Black Sea Fleet, and invited Kiev to join the Russia-influenced Customs Union, promising a major discount on gas prices. The former deal is meant to close NATO's door for Ukraine; the purpose of the latter is to keep Ukraine within the area of Russia's economic influence. In May 2013, Ukraine joined

the Customs Union as an associate member. In Kyrgyzstan, Russia sought to bring to power a pro-Russian coalition and encourage a political system with a strong central authority. Even in Georgia, the Kremlin is finding a way to influence events

without relying on force—by developing ties with members of the Georgian elite critical of President Mikheil Saakashvili and with members of Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili's circle.

More recently, Russia has begun to promote regional integration in Eurasia. Moscow initiated the Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan in 2010. In 2011, Putin introduced the idea of a Eurasian Union. He laid out economic incentives for joining it, including increased trade, common modernization projects, and improved standards of living. Expected to be completed by 2015, the new arrangement was proposed with an eye on the EU, on one hand, and China, on the other. In addition to considerations of economic development and balance of power, Moscow's emphasis on building a Eurasian Union is shaped by the new vision of Russia as a distinct civilization.

Russia's success in Eurasia has been limited by weaknesses of its economy and cultural values, as well as external factors. The global economic crisis in particular revealed the tenuous nature of

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Russia's regional influence and the frailty of its soft power base. The crisis hit Russia hard: GDP fell by around 8 percent in 2009. Not only did the Kremlin have to spend a considerable portion of its reserves to bail out domestic enterprises; it also was compelled to scale down its activist foreign policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In terms of cultural values, Russia remains divided between supporters of a strong-state developmental model and those favoring a European path, as the anti-Putin protests of the past two years show.

Externally, mistrust in relations with the West limits Moscow's use of soft power. A lack of progress in resolving issues such as a US-led missile-defense system in Europe or the coordination of policies regarding Afghanistan, Syria, or the former Soviet states may encourage the Kremlin to strengthen the hard, rather than soft, components of its power, thereby presenting the states of Eurasia with difficult choices. Elites in the former Soviet states are frequently unhappy with Moscow's lack of sensitivity toward their interests, even as they remain attracted to Russia and suspicious of other powers in the region. In order to balance against Russia's power, Central Asian states often seek to strengthen ties with China and the United States. In June 2012, Uzbekistan went so far as to withdraw from the CSTO—in part to signal its dissatisfaction with Moscow.

DISCONNECT WITH THE WEST

Russia's relations with Western nations are paradoxical—they seek good relations while remaining distrustful of each other. The United States and Europe view Russia as an important power and recognize its influence in Eurasia and in non-Western international coalitions, such as the SCO and BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China). Western powers have tried to involve Russia in projects of mutual significance. The United States attempted to “reset” relations with Moscow when Dmitri Medvedev was president, and is trying to preserve some momentum since Putin's return to the presidency. In particular, Barack Obama's administration has worked to reach understandings with the Kremlin on nuclear arms control, the Middle East, and counterterrorism.

Recently the US-Russian relationship has survived two crises—one associated with the US Congress's passage of the Magnitsky Act, the other with Russia's refusal to extradite the fugitive Edward Snowden, who had leaked National Security Agency secrets. In the former case, several Russian

officials presumed responsible for human rights violations were denied visas to the United States and their assets were frozen. In the latter case, Russia declined to extradite Snowden even after Washington threatened the Kremlin with “serious consequences” and canceled a bilateral summit in Moscow scheduled for September.

Ties with Europe, meanwhile, have been growing since France and Germany joined Russia in opposing the US war in Iraq. Russia's recovery as a leading energy supplier has also given it influence in Europe. Relationships with European nations have survived Russia's heavy-handed approach in Chechnya, its energy conflicts with Ukraine, and the August 2008 crisis in the Caucasus.

Despite Western countries' recognition of Russia's importance, they tend to perceive Moscow as threatening and disrespectful of international rules. The elites and political experts mistrust the Kremlin's intentions and frequently present Russia's domestic and international policies as hostile and anti-Western. They are especially concerned by the Kremlin's warnings against external interference in Russia's domestic affairs and its steps to restrict activities of Western nongovernmental organizations and political opposition inside the country.

In addition, there are many who deny Russia's relevance as a significant international power and who are convinced that the country is fundamentally weakened by a competition of rival factions within the Kremlin. For example, Vice President Joseph Biden, in a 2009 interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, appeared to question the need for the United States to take Russia into serious consideration. “The reality is, the Russians are where they are,” Biden said. “They have a shrinking population base, they have a withering economy, they have a banking sector and structure that is not likely to be able to withstand the next 15 years, they're in a situation where the world is changing before them and they're clinging to something in the past that is not sustainable.” Global public perceptions of Russia also are not encouraging. According to a Pew Research Global Attitude Project conducted in 27 countries, from 2007 to 2012 the number of people viewing Russia favorably decreased in 17 countries and increased in only 3.

Aware of the problem, the Kremlin has hired public relations agencies in the West, funded radio and television programs with pro-Russian news coverage, and established organizations to combat the negative perception of Russia. In 2012,

Putin ordered the government to improve Russia's ranking in the World Bank's Doing Business Index from 120th in 2011 to 20th by 2018. In 2013, Russia hired the US investment bank Goldman Sachs to help market the country's investment potential abroad.

Changing the perceptions of Russia and the Kremlin as unfriendly toward business, intolerant of political opposition, and engaged in energy blackmail against neighbors is going to be challenging, however. As a semi-peripheral country with ambitions to preserve great power status and distinct cultural values, Russia is bound to continue to have difficulties convincing the West of its attractiveness. Historically, Russians have not defined their system of values as anti-Western. Yet the distinctiveness of Russian values and interests requires a large capital of trust to make the relationship with Moscow work—a level of trust that both sides lack. There have been multiple examples of cooperation, but more frequently in response to a common security threat than during times of peace. The weakness of soft power based on economic interdependence and the lack of attraction toward each other's political values have made it easier for Russia and the West to turn away from promising cooperative projects each time one side has found the other's actions to be disrespectful. This is especially true of the United States and Europe, which view their institutions as democratic and therefore superior to those of authoritarian Russia.

THE FUTURE OF SOFT POWER

In the next 10 to 15 years, Moscow is likely to continue to experience difficulties with developing its soft power and using it in foreign policy. The Kremlin would do well to appreciate the limitations of Russian soft power in Eurasia and, especially, in the West. A realistic response from Moscow would address both the supply and the demand side of its soft power strategy. In a globally interconnected world, the two sides depend on each other: The development of the domestic economy and promotion of Russian cultural values depend on the outside world's approval, just as the projection of a favorable image abroad requires domestic successes.

In the regional context, the successful and mutually beneficial development of the Russia-

Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union will help boost Moscow's soft power. But Russia remains internally constrained in building a Eurasian Union. Attempts to expand it by including new members such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan may require large subsidies on Russia's part, thereby undermining, rather than strengthening, its soft power and the future benefits from mutual cooperation.

In the context of relations with Western nations, realism requires that Russia's efforts to promote a favorable image abroad not come at the expense of developing its economy and internal values. The bottom line is that many political and business circles in the West will remain skeptical of Russia until it demonstrates the ability to generate consistently high indicators of growth and development. Differences in values and interests are not going to disappear and may only be narrowed gradually. Moscow's image-making strategy should target those constituencies in the West that are more inclined to view Russia favorably. It would be useless to try to win over those inherently skeptical by inviting them to various Kremlin-funded forums and conferences. Instead, the targeted audiences should include those potentially interested in investing in Russia, cooperating on issues of global security, and benefiting from Russia's contributions to world culture. Because of their position and values, these groups are less likely to be driven by negative stereotypes, and may be more receptive to Russia's soft power.

For the Western countries, Moscow's soft power invites dialogue and creates possibilities for cooperation. Russia's distinct values and interests do not make it an enemy of the West. However, such distinctiveness produces a paradox: The more that Western politicians expect the Kremlin to comply with their standards and institutions, the less likely Russia is to accept them at home and abroad. Instead of lecturing Russia on the virtues of democracy, Western governments would do well to assess which parts of Russian and Western soft power are compatible. Just as many neighbors of Russia are comfortable with it, the West too can learn to benefit from Russia's soft power by helping to channel it in a favored direction. Such an approach will require patience, sensitivity, and sustained engagement. Over time, it may help to empower Russian moderates, thereby improving relations with Moscow. ■