

Limits to Russian Soft Power in the Post-Soviet Area

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Limits to Russian Soft Power in the Post-Soviet Area

by Jarosław Ówiek-Karpowicz

Summary

Limits to Russian Soft Power in the Post-Soviet Area

by Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz

The influence of soft power is very difficult to measure. It is associated with intangible resources such as culture or ideology, as well as the ability to use them skillfully in order to gain allies through attraction rather than coercion or payments. After the collapse of communism, Russia retained a huge military potential from the Soviet Union but largely lost its cultural and ideological appeal. Therefore, in order to rebuild its external attractiveness (at least in the post-Soviet space), Russia began to develop its foreign policy according to soft power principles. But Russian policy-makers misinterpreted the concept of soft power. They failed to appreciate the idea of partnerships with clear advantages for both sides in the near and long term. Instead, Moscow perceives soft power as the capacity to influence, or even manipulate, public opinion in target countries.

Although Russia possesses influential soft power channels to post-Soviet states like access to its labor market, language proximity, a common culture, and enormous energy resources, Moscow has been unable to enhance its attractiveness among its closest neighbors. Russian authorities focus most of all on loyal constituencies (such as compatriots living abroad) and seek to mobilize people who already follow Russia's goals and principles. Russia's insufficient soft power activism in the post-Soviet area is also due to its neo-imperial attitude toward neighboring states. Moscow is not able to offer them an attractive vision of integration without building patterns of strong dependence. Therefore, its proposal of close political and economic cooperation seems quite dangerous for the sovereignty and long-term development of its neighbors.

The notion of soft power holds strong normative potential based on domestic standards and norms of social and political life that are practiced in the state seeking to enhance its influence abroad. It is impossible to create an appealing external image without dealing effectively with domestic problems. Russia has many problems with corruption, the abuse of human rights, the lack of democracy, and the rule of law. Thus its model of political and socio-economic transformation cannot be seen as a positive example for other post-Soviet countries.

As soft powers usually use the most transparent and democratic measures to build their external attractiveness, the only way for Russia to become a real soft power in the post-Soviet area is to introduce serious internal reforms that focus on the liberalization of its economy and the democratization of its political system. It is only through real democratic change that Russia will reach its soft power potential.

Zusammenfassung

Begrenzungen für russische »soft power« im postsowjetischen Gebiet

von Jarosław Ówiek-Karpowicz

Der Einfluss von »soft power« ist äußerst schwer zu messen. Er steht in engem Zusammenhang mit immateriellen Ressourcen wie Kultur oder Ideologie, wie auch mit der Fähigkeit, diese geschickt einzusetzen, um Verbündete eher durch Anziehungskraft statt durch Zwang oder Bezahlung zu gewinnen. Nach dem Zusammenbruch des Kommunismus behielt Russland ein riesiges Militärpotenzial aus dem Erbe der Sowjetunion, verlor aber so gut wie jegliche kulturelle und ideologische Anziehungskraft. Daher begann Russland in dem Bestreben, seine Anziehungskraft im Ausland (zumindest im postsowjetischen Raum) wiederherzustellen, seine Außenpolitik gemäß Prinzipien der »soft power« zu entwickeln. Doch dabei unterlagen die russischen Politiker einer Fehlinterpretation dieses Konzepts. Sie wussten die Idee einer Partnerschaft mit klaren Vorteilen für beide Seiten nicht wertzuschätzen. Stattdessen nimmt Moskau »soft power« nur wahr als das Potenzial zur Beeinflussung, ja zu Manipulation der öffentlichen Meinung in Zielländern.

Auch wenn Russland wichtige Kanäle für »soft power« gegenüber postsowjetischen Staaten besitzt wie etwa der Zugang zu seinem Arbeitsmarkt, sprachliche Nähe, eine gemeinsame Kultur und riesige Energieressourcen, sah es sich außerstande, seine Anziehungskraft für die direkten Nachbarn zu erhöhen. Die russischen Machthaber konzentrieren sich vor allem auf eine loyale Anhängerschaft (wie etwa Landsleute, die im Ausland leben) und bemühen sich darum, Menschen zu mobilisieren, die Russlands Ziele und Prinzipien bereits teilen. Russlands unzureichende »soft power«-Aktivitäten in der postsowjetischen Region sind ebenfalls bestimmt durch seine neoimperiale Einstellung gegenüber den Nachbarländern. Moskau ist unfähig, ihnen eine attraktive Aussicht auf Integration zu bieten, ohne zugleich wieder Muster einer starken Abhängigkeit einzuführen. Deshalb erscheint sein Vorschlag einer engen wirtschaftlichen und politischen Zusammenarbeit recht gefährlich für die Souveränität und langfristige Entwicklung seiner Nachbarn.

Der Begriff der »soft power« enthält ein starkes normatives Potenzial, das auf innenpolitischen Standards sowie Normen des sozialen und politischen Lebens beruht, die in dem Staat praktiziert werden, der seinen außenpolitischen Einfluss vergrößern will. Es ist unmöglich, ein attraktives Image im Ausland zu schaffen, ohne sich wirksam mit innenpolitischen Problemen auseinanderzusetzen. In Russland bestehen große Probleme mit Korruption, der Missachtung von Menschenrechten, mit einer mangelhaften Demokratie und einem schwachen Rechtsstaat. Deshalb kann sein Modell der politischen und der sozioökonomischen Transformation kein positives Vorbild für andere postsowjetische Staaten sein.

Da »soft powers« üblicherweise die transparentesten und demokratischsten Maßnahmen einsetzen, um ihre nach außen wirkende Anziehungskraft aufzubauen, besteht die einzige Möglichkeit für Russland, zu einer wirklichen »soft power« im postsowjetischen Gebiet zu werden, im Beginn ernsthafter innerer Reformen, die sich auf die Liberalisierung seiner Wirtschaft und die Demokratisierung seines politischen Systems konzentrieren. Nur durch wirkliche demokratische Veränderung wird Russland sein volles Potenzial an »soft power« erreichen.

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Die DGAP trägt mit wissenschaftlichen Untersuchungen und Veröffentlichungen zur Bewertung internationaler Entwicklungen und zur Diskussion hierüber bei. Die in den Veröffentlichungen geäußerten Meinungen sind die der Autoren.

Limits to Russian Soft Power in the Post-Soviet Area

by Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz

Russia's Soft Power Potential

The effectiveness of soft power instruments used by states is extremely difficult to evaluate because it is associated with intangible resources such as culture or ideology, as well as their skillful usage in the pursuit of allies. According to Joseph S. Nye, the political scientist who introduced the concept of “soft power,” soft power states are those which are defined by their “ability to get what they want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” and which can be cultivated through relations with allies, economic assistance, and cultural exchanges.¹ In that sense, the concept of soft power is not limited to the capacity to influence, or even to manipulate public opinion in a target country. It also includes a well-developed idea of a partnership with mutual benefits in the near and long term.² In other words, soft power convinces—but does not force—others to want what it wants because of clear advantages for both sides, and soft powers tend to use the most transparent and democratic measures to build their credibility in this regard.

After the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia inherited a huge military potential but largely lost its cultural and ideological appeal. At the time, its external image seemed to be even more important than during the Cold War. In order to rebuild its attractiveness (at least in the post-Soviet space), Russia began to develop its foreign policy according to soft power principles. Although many experts assumed that Russia's ability to apply soft power techniques toward post-Soviet countries was minimal, some saw its soft power potential as quite significant.³ They agree that Russia's source of attractiveness in the post-Soviet space is related to at least four elements: a huge labor market, language proximity, a common culture, and enormous energy resources.

Most of the post-Soviet states have a visa-free regime with Russia, which makes its large labor market quite accessible to post-Soviet citizens. Officially, there are about three million workers from CIS countries in Russia, but there are four times as many people who work there illegally.⁴ Among the European Union's six Eastern partners, most foreign workers in Russia come from Armenia (2.5 million), Ukraine and Azerbaijan (2 million), Georgia (1 million), Belarus (up to 700,000), and Moldova (more than 300,000). Russia is the most attractive work destination for these citizens, but in the case of Ukraine and Moldova, almost the same number of people prefer working in the EU because of geographic and cultural proximity.

In addition to the visa-free regime, widespread knowledge of the Russian language is another important reason for emigration to Russia. Although the Russian minority does not exceed 20 percent in the six Eastern Partnership countries, a majority of the populations of these countries know Russian, most notably in Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova.⁵ Russian is still a common language in business, social, cultural, and scientific relations, despite the fact that the Soviet Union met its demise over 20 years ago. Although the number of schools that use Russian as the language of instruction has decreased, a majority of people living in post-Soviet states consider Russian as an important language in the education of younger generations.⁶

Other sources of Russia's attractiveness toward post-Soviet states are cultural, religious, and historical links. The Russian Orthodox Church plays a very significant role in this regard, and its jurisdiction is recognized by most believers in Belarus and Moldova, as well as by a significant number of Ukrainians. Russian popular culture, including con-

temporary music, books, films, and TV programs, are also widely popular in post-Soviet states. The most influential products of Russian soft power tend to use the rhetoric of fraternity in reference to the common victory in World War II and nostalgia for the lost Soviet empire.

The last soft power channel that Russia uses toward its post-Soviet neighbors is its huge energy potential.⁷ Russia ranks first and eighth in the world in proven reserves of natural gas and crude oil. Although it is the number one energy exporter in the world, its leading position as an oil and gas supplier is possible mainly because of the Soviet-era development its energy industry. Russia's energy sector is very inefficient and now needs enormous investments to maintain a high level of crude oil and natural gas production.⁸ The geographical proximity of Russian resources can act as a source of economic attraction for all post-Soviet countries, especially for those whose economies are largely depend on cheap energy resources. It is also worth noting that a lack of transparency in business deals with Russian energy companies often allow elites in neighboring countries to obtain huge private benefits.⁹

Increasing Russia's Soft Power after the "Color Revolutions"

The most significant period for applying soft power as part of Russian foreign policy was during the "color revolutions" in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004). These events occurred almost at the same time that the EU expanded to the east, when eight states from Central and Eastern Europe, including the three former Soviet republics of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, became new EU member states. Both processes were perceived by Russia's policy makers as a threat to its interests in the post-Soviet neighborhood as well as a failure of Russian foreign policy.¹⁰ Russian politicians realized that the West's predominance over Russia in the post-Soviet area is due to better access to public opinion through well developed soft power channels such as international NGOs and media outlets. The Kremlin perceived these instruments as tools of Western propaganda that should be counterbalanced by Russia's response.

Russian soft power activity in reaction to growing Western influence in the post-Soviet space focused on formulating an ideological response. Russian authorities have begun to promote their own vision of democracy, criticizing Western liberal democratic countries for ideological imperialism in promoting democratic values around the world.¹¹ In 2004, Sergei Ivanov, who is now chief of staff of the Presidential administration and is a former Minister of Defence, admitted that "if there is a Western democracy, Eastern democracy should also exist."¹² Later, Deputy Prime Minister Vladislav Surkov created the concept of "sovereign democracy," which justified weaker societal control over political authorities than in Western liberal democracies.¹³

Russian authorities also tried to formulate a positive message for citizens of the former Soviet Union, without referring to the activities of Western countries. This approach was based on the conviction that Russian society—as well as other post-Soviet societies—needs a mobilizing idea.¹⁴ They decided that the best way to bring together the nations of the former Soviet Union was to refer to their joint victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. They thus supported a number of film productions and organized elaborate celebrations for the anniversary of victory in WWII. At the same time, Moscow was particularly sensitive to any attempt to discredit the achievements of the Soviet Army, which in fact liberated Central and Eastern European countries from the Nazis, but also forced them into communism and took their sovereignty.¹⁵

Following the color revolutions, Russia has attempted to exert more influence over post-Soviet states through soft power tools such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Russian Orthodox Church, and media dissemination. In 2007, Russian authorities established the Russkiy Mir Foundation (Russian World), which is financed by both the government and private companies. The name of this organization refers to the ideological concept of the Russian nation that goes beyond geographical and ethnic boundaries and focuses on cultural and linguistic links. It means that the "Russian world" consists of people

who think and speak in Russian, not just those who identify as Russians.

The official aim of the Russkiy Mir Foundation is to popularize Russian language and culture as a crucial element of world civilization, and to develop cross-culture dialogues and understanding between people.¹⁶ The organization's activities are quite controversial because it focuses mainly on strengthening the position of the Russian diaspora living in post-Soviet states. Russkiy Mir's activities extend far beyond the promotion of language and culture: it concentrates on the fight against the "falsification of history," the protection of the rights of Russian minorities, as well as pushing Russia's agenda in neighboring countries. The foundation has a very nationalist image.¹⁷

In addition to pro-Kremlin (quasi) non-governmental organizations, the Russian Orthodox Church has also become an important ally in supporting state policies toward compatriots living abroad. Russian Orthodox leaders have often supported the Russian World ideology. The new Moscow Patriarch, Kirill I, declared that "the core of the Russian World today is Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, and... regardless of state divisions... we are spiritually one people."¹⁸ For Kirill, who is interested in the unification of Orthodox believers living in post-Soviet countries, there should be a unique Russian civilization that opposes Western civilization and its assertion of the universality of the Western tradition. The Moscow Patriarchat has also intensified the establishment of Orthodox associations in post-Soviet states, especially in Ukraine, with a clearly pro-Russian political agenda.¹⁹

The third instrument used widely by Russian authorities to increase their soft power influence in post-Soviet states and in other countries in the aftermath of the color revolutions was mass media, especially television and the Internet. Russian state-controlled TV news programs were broadcast across most of the CIS territory and increased their influence on public opinion. Moreover, in 2005 the Kremlin founded the TV news channel Russia Today (RT), which broadcasts in English, Spanish, and Arabic in over 100 countries. Web-based private news agencies such as Regnum and Novy

Region were also very effective in strengthening Kremlin-sanctioned views on the domestic situation in the post-Soviet states. For many journalists from Ukraine, Belarus, and other post-Soviet countries, these outlets were a main source for global and local information.²⁰ Thus in 2004 Russian authorities also decided to modernize the state-owned news agency RIA Novosti. They established the website Inosmi.ru to provide Russian-language versions of foreign publications. At the time, popular Russian newspapers, among them *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Argumenty i Fakty*, enlarged their special editions in neighboring countries, and *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* launched a special program with dozens of global newspapers such as the *Washington Post*, *Daily Telegraph*, and *Le Figaro*, to edit their monthly supplement on Russia's political situation for foreign audiences.

In response to the color revolutions, Russia's ruling elites boosted their political power in the country and limited Western influence in the post-Soviet space. Their soft power activities in this regard were mostly seen as propaganda against Western efforts to promote democracy and human rights, and not as a reliable offer of cooperation with target countries. Due to the huge influence of Russian media in the post-Soviet area, a large segment of Ukrainian society supported Russia's position in its 2008 war with Georgia (although the Ukrainian government pursued a different policy at the time). However, Ukraine did not completely change its orientation toward economic and political integration with Western institutions.²¹

Russia's Soft Power Politics after the Russo-Georgian War

Russia's military intervention in Georgia damaged the country's reputation in the post-Soviet area. Leaders of CIS countries began to fear for their states' territorial integrity, so none of them recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, against Russia expectations. To improve political and social relations with neighboring countries, the Kremlin tried to use the positive image of the Orthodox Church in the post-Soviet area to its advantage.²² Patriarch Kirill helped Russia partially rebuild its image in Georgia. The Moscow Patri-

archate has recognized the canonical jurisdiction of the Georgian Church over separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Russian Church has also played the important role of arbiter and offered, in practical terms, financial support for the Abkhazian and Ossetian parishes.

Following the Russo-Georgian War, Russian authorities decided to strengthen soft power channels toward compatriots and establish stronger links between Moscow and the vast Russian diaspora. In September 2008, President Dmitry Medvedev reformed the federal agency for compatriots (Rossotrudnichestvo), and in May 2011 he created the Compatriot Legal Support and Protection Fund. Moreover, Russian authorities began to define compatriots not only as Russian Federation citizens living abroad, but also former citizens of the USSR, Russian immigrants from the USSR or the Russian Federation, descendants of compatriots, and foreign citizens who admire Russia's culture and language.²³ Moscow also required that "the compatriot identity be certified by a respective civil society organization or by the person's activities to promote and preserve the Russian language and culture."²⁴

Russian authorities also decided to more extensively promote Russian youth movements among compatriots living in neighboring countries. In summer 2010 they held an international forum at Lake Selinger to give a warm welcome to young leaders from post-Soviet states. In addition, the ultra-nationalist youth organization Nashi (Ours), which was created by pro-Kremlin social activist Vasily Yakemenko, enlarged its activities beyond Russian borders. For example, in Estonia they established the youth organization Molodoye Slovo (Word of the Youth) which has supported youth exchange programs, sporting events, summer camps, and public demonstrations.²⁵

The Kremlin's activities aimed at the Russian minority are seen negatively by neighboring governments and societies. They interpret Russia's policy toward the diaspora as a tool of its foreign policy that threatens the sovereignty and territorial integrity of their countries.²⁶ This assumption is confirmed by declarations by Russian officials who

admit that the "Russian diaspora abroad provides social and humanitarian support for the implementation of the interests of the Russian Federation in post-Soviet countries."²⁷

The Russo-Georgian War also tightened Russian policy toward its closest neighbors. The Kremlin decided to enlarge its influence in the CIS area by mobilizing loyal constituencies living there despite the negative consequences that would result from such a policy. After the war in Georgia, Russia's attitude toward its compatriots living abroad also became more nationalist, which has raised concerns in neighboring states. Although Russian politicians claim that this policy has been based on soft power principles,²⁸ it certainly contradicts Joseph Nye's concept of soft power because it hampers real partnerships with target countries.

Russia's Influence in the Global Financial and Economic Crisis

Although Russia was deeply hit by the global financial crisis of 2008–2009, other post-Soviet countries faced more serious socio-economic problems. Due to its large financial reserves, Moscow was able to implement a series of anti-crisis measures that stabilized the labor market as well as the finances of many state-run companies. This relatively positive economic situation prompted the Russian elite to use the crisis to enlarge the country's political and economic influence in CIS states by acquiring assets in their most important companies. This belief was formulated in Russia's unofficial foreign policy doctrine that was published in the Russian edition of *Newsweek* in May 2010.²⁹ By acquiring major shares in several energy enterprises, Russia strengthened its monopoly on energy markets in the region. Although Russian authorities underlined the mutual benefits that resulted from such transactions, for neighboring governments it was obvious that establishing joint ventures with Russian companies in the energy sector usually leads to dependency.

The EU's efforts to establish a free trade area with its Eastern neighbors led the Kremlin to strengthen the development of alternative projects for economic integration in the post-Soviet area. The

Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan is the most serious Russian economic project in years. Russia has offered membership in this organization to other post-Soviet states, above all to Ukraine, in order to complicate their accession to the free trade area with the EU. When comparing the EU and Russian projects for economic integration, it is clear that the EU's offer is more attractive for post-Soviet states, mainly because of the positive impact it would have on the modernization of their economies. On the other hand, due to its many requirements, the EU offer is more difficult to achieve, which makes the Russian project much more accessible. Russia uses its energy resources rather than soft power to enhance its economic domination in the post-Soviet area. Offering preferential gas prices in exchange for political concessions cannot be viewed as increasing Russian soft power in the region. It is payment, not economic assistance, and apart from short-term benefits it does not further the economic development of Russia's partners and it undermines their political independence. In April 2010, Russia reached an agreement with Ukraine for discounted deliveries of Russian natural gas. But in exchange, Ukraine had to extend the lease of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Crimea for 25 years after 2017. Russia then proposed special gas prices for Belarus in exchange for the sale of stakes in Belarusian strategic enterprises to Russian companies.³⁰

Russia has tried to engage more in global development aid. In 2009 and 2010, Russia spent 785 million dollar and 472 million dollar respectively on aid, compared to an annual contribution from 2004 to 2008 of about 200 million dollar.³¹ The majority of these funds went to post-Soviet countries. Contrary to other global powers, Russia does not involve the non-governmental sector and its aid very often is associated with the direct implementation of Russian political objectives in recipient countries. Such actions are against the basic principles of development assistance and do not improve soft power influence.

Russia's socio-economic model limits its capacity to act as a soft power in the post-Soviet area.³² Although Russia has the highest GDP per capita among CIS member states, there are many systemic problems that cannot be resolved. According

Transparency International, Russia is more corrupt than the six Eastern Partnership states.³³ It also has major problems with the rule of law and media freedom, ranking 163 and 140 in the world respectively.³⁴ The stability and effectiveness of Russia's government is also low compared to other post-Soviet countries: according to the World Bank, Russia's ranking of 119 makes it more poorly governed than Georgia (83) and Armenia (93).³⁵ All of these factors undermine the attractiveness of the Russian political leadership among post-Soviet societies, namely Vladimir Putin, who was more popular than many domestic politicians in some post-Soviet states before 2008. According to recent surveys from 2011 that compared the political leadership in Russia and the United States, Barack Obama was viewed more favorably than Vladimir Putin in Georgia (47% approval for Obama versus 3% for Putin) and in Azerbaijan (58% to 54%).³⁶

Conclusions

Russia holds influential soft power channels for post-Soviet states such as an accessible labor market, language proximity, a common culture, and enormous energy resources. But the country has not been able to enhance its attractiveness as a soft power among its closest neighbors. Although Russian policy-makers recognize the importance of soft power, they have misinterpreted the concept. They reduce it to a platform for spreading propaganda and focus most of all on loyal constituencies like compatriots living in post-Soviet states. Russian policy in this regard seems to contradict the concept of soft power: instead of winning people over who do not share Russia's foreign principles and goals, the country seeks to mobilize those who already agree with them.

Russian elites do not appreciate the idea of a true partnership with mutual benefits in the near and long term. Russia's failed soft power activism in the post-Soviet area is also a result of its neo-imperialist attitude toward neighboring states. Moscow has been unable to offer them an attractive vision of cooperation without building patterns of strong dependence. Thus its proposal of closer economic integration appears to threaten their sovereignty and long-term development.

The notion of soft power contains strong normative potential based on domestic standards and norms of social and political life practiced in the state intending to enhance its influence abroad. It is impossible to create an appealing external image without dealing effectively with domestic problems. Russia has enormous problems with corruption, abuse of human rights, the lack of democracy, and the rule of law. Therefore, its model of political and socio-economic transformation cannot be seen as a positive example for other post-Soviet countries. In order to strengthen its soft power influence, Russia should first of all pursue serious internal reforms that focus on the liberalization of its economy and the modernization of its government as well as a democratization of its political system. The EU could be a strategic partner for Russia in

this regard by offering further assistance during its political and socio-economic modernization.

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Notes

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