# Russian Soft Power Under Construction

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OLEG SHAKIROV, FEB 14 2013

For the last decade, Russian soft power policy has been mostly what scholars were eager to trace and discover rather than a subject they could really study. Indeed, the term “soft power” was largely absent from official Russian foreign policy discourse. Russia’s concern about intangible aspects of its international activity was framed as a need to improve its image abroad and establish stronger ties with Russian compatriots in other countries.

A growing interest in soft power among Russian leadership was marked by Vladimir Putin’s reference to it as a “matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence”[1] in his pre-election article *Russia and the Changing World* in February 2012. Then-Prime Minister Putin introduced this notion with a rather negative connotation as related to “direct interference in the domestic policy of sovereign countries”[2]. In July 2012, two months after his presidential inauguration, Vladimir Putin held a meeting with Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives in international organisations where he argued that “‘soft power’ is all about promoting one’s interests and policies through persuasion and creating a positive perception of one’s country, based not just on its material achievements but also its spiritual and intellectual heritage.”[3] Concerning the former definition, Alexey Dolinsky compares it with that of the author of the term “soft power”, Joseph Nye, noting that the difference between them “is far from being stylistic: the American political scientist points out attractiveness as the key element of the notion, while the Russian politician is focused on the levers of influence.”[4] The latter definition thus elaborates on how Russia would wield such influence in a non-intrusive manner.

Previously Russia has faced criticism over its soft power. For instance, the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) 2011 Report suggests that, despite similarities with the concept developed by Joseph Nye, “much of Russia’s evolving foreign policy, particularly directed toward the Baltic states and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) with significant Russian-speaking minorities, appears more a hybrid mix of classical forms of soft power [such as “radio broadcasting, popular Russian music” which are cited as examples further in the study] and Soviet-style propaganda, as embodied in its Compatriot Policy.”[5] This mix is dubbed “soft propaganda”.

In general, Russia’s slow mastering of contemporary approaches to soft power was due to the conservatism of Russian diplomacy, attempting to operate in what Nye called a third dimension of power (the first two being military and economic) by means of state-centric tools. Yet, as Nye puts it, many soft power resources are outside of government’s control, and its effect is often indirect and dependent on the audience’s reception[6].

**Institutional framework**

Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, prospects for a fully-fledged, globally-oriented Russian soft power strategy are promising. Foremost, in recent years, during Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency, Russia has progressed in improving the institutional basis for a smart foreign policy.

In 2008, the Russian Centre for International Scientific and Cultural Cooperation (RCISCC or *Roszarubezhtsentr*), a governmental successor of the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, was transformed into the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (*Rossotrudnichestvo*). The new agency took possession

of a broad network of RCISCC's foreign missions – there are currently missions in 76 countries[7] – and was compared to USAID in its scale and new functions[8]. By the end of 2011, however, *Rossotrudnichestvo* had not met expectations of a significant increase of Russian influence abroad – an anonymous Kremlin official even called the agency's activity a "mystery" for those professionally involved in foreign policy, as quoted by *Kommersant**[9]*** – which was the reason for administrative change. In March 2012, Konstantin Kosachev, who had served as the Chairman of the State Duma Committee on Foreign Affairs for the previous seven years, was appointed as the head of *Rossrotrudnichestvo*. Given Kosachev's professionalism and experience as a public figure, this change is able to revitalize the agency.

In an interview, published shortly after his appointment, Kosachev acknowledged that, to date, Russia's ability to wield soft power has not been as effective as that of Russia's competitors. "We often have a simplified understanding of 'soft power'" he said,[10] mentioning two opposite viewpoints which regard soft power either as a set of tools for indirect coercion, or as a presence in other countries. Instead, Kosachev shares Joseph Nye's definition, arguing that "voluntary agreement of our prospective partners, our prospective allies to cooperate with Russia should be the subject of our country's implementation of soft power concept."[11] He also assumes that the common Russian attitude to soft power as a secondary tool is rooted in a general world view. "It's necessary to understand that non-material, humanitarian part of our life is no less, maybe even more important than its material, tangible part."

*Rossotrudnichestvo* is supposed to become the coordinating center for various kinds of Russian foreign humanitarian activity, including support for Russian compatriots living abroad, preserving Russian cultural heritage, promoting the Russian culture and language and educational and scientific cooperation. The agency is also likely to take a leading role in managing Russian international development assistance[12] – the Concept of Russia's participation in international development assistance was approved by the President in 2007[13], but up to now no agency has been designated to implement it. With such an ambitious agenda, the financing and responsibilities of *Rossotrudnichestvo* are expected to expand accordingly[14]. Thus, in the draft of the new edition of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept, this agency was mentioned for the first time as one of the players participating in the development and implementation of Russian foreign policy[15].

In 2010 President Medvedev ordered the establishment of two new institutions with foreign policy goals: the *Gorchakov Fund for Public Diplomacy Support* and *Russian International Affairs Council*. The Fund for Public Diplomacy Support was named after Alexander Gorchakov – a prominent and highly respected Russian diplomat of the 19th century and schoolmate of one of the greatest Russian poets, Alexander Pushkin. Overall, this initiative was welcomed by experts, with one Russian official even calling it a "revolutionary" step aimed to improve the country's image abroad[16].

The Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), which started operating in July 2011, serves as "a link between the state, expert community, business and civil society in an effort to find foreign policy solutions"[17] RIAC's President, former Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Ivanov, published an article in late 2011, in which he states that, for Russia, learning to use "soft power" is a key to "smart" foreign policy. Ivanov believes that "[…] we need to drastically update and expand the range of foreign policy tools which Moscow can employ in international relations. A "smart" foreign policy requires the ability of the political leadership to make use of the widest range of assets at the disposal of a particular country and a particular society. Including, of course, the nonmaterial assets, which were often ignored or at least seriously underestimated by the traditional diplomacy of the past."[18]

By creating state agencies responsible for encouraging, financing, and (preferably) directing nongovernmental foreign activity, Russia expects to boost its "soft" influence. The necessity for it is explained by Kosachev as follows: "Soft power opportunities best meet Russian foreign policy tasks at present. These tasks stem from the needs of domestic development […]. They are […] means to modernize the country."[19] Thus, growing interest in soft power in Russia appears to be rather pragmatic and instrumentalist.

**Non-governmental dimension**

Of course, the success of such an approach would depend not only on the effectiveness of governmental bodies

designed to transmit soft power, but also on the capabilities of non-governmental organizations, which should generate it.

Surveys of the Russian non-governmental sector conducted in 2007 shows that nearly a fifth of NGOs in Russia (18.4%) have international ties (participation in international events, membership in international networks, etc). [20] According to the same surveys, government financing of NGOs in Russia only amounts to between 6% and 13% of their budgets. In June 2012, President Vladimir Putin suggested a threefold increase of financing for NGOs from the state budget, from one to three billion rubles[21], to compensate for stricter requirements introduced in a law passed to regulate NGOs adeptly soon thereafter.[22] As Tatiana Zonova notes: "The new law introducing the term "foreign agent" includes cumbersome procedures of reporting the receipt of foreign aid which leads to an increased bureaucracy."[23] Overall, this can be regarded as an attempt to switch NGOs from foreign to domestic financing, and thus to leverage more control over their activities.

Secondly, performance and competence are another critical point. According to Konstantin Kosachev the number of officially-registered NGOs involved in foreign policy is around 5000, 859 of which enjoy international status. "In practice, we sometimes see a couple of U.S. or European foundations acting more effectively (which implies more economically) than Russian NGOs. Competence and good quality overpower quantity."[24] While raising effectiveness is to a considerable degree an endogenous issue of organizations, certain steps are taken by official agencies to facilitate this process, such as round-tables and meetings on public diplomacy organized by the Gorchakov Fund and RIAC for experts and representatives of non-governmental organizations.

**Digital diplomacy**

Russia has also engaged in modernizing its traditional diplomacy, most notably by increasing its presence on the Internet. In 2011, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched a new and more user-friendly version of its website main page (the foreign language versions remain unchanged). In June 2012, the Ministry's first Youtube account was launched; in seven months, 345 videos have been uploaded and viewed approximately 105 000 times. Another social network that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs started to actively use is Twitter. As of February 2013 there are 68 accounts.[25] One of the most prominent is that of Ambassador of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom, Alexander Yakovenko. In an article, Ambassador Yakovenko argues that Russia is relatively successful in this sphere and suggests an example that, despite being a "twiplomacy" newcomer, "in the London ranking of followers the [Russian] Embassy is third after US and Israel which have invested heavily in this instrument of foreign policy over longer period of time."[26]

Not all embassies are similarly experienced with social media. It is worth mentioning that among 68 accounts, 26 were created in the short period between July and August 2011 (16 of which in one week) pro forma: five of them have zero or one tweet, and several others don't post regularly. Furthermore, 15 accounts (embassies and one general-consulate) do not the language of their host nation, and write in Russian, English or both, which limits their outreach and prevents from communicating with a larger local audience. One of the obvious reasons is that traditional diplomatic know-how is not always relevant for new media. As Ambassador Yakovenko puts it: "People of my profession are used to self-restraint and often believe that once we have a position on something, published on the official website, all those who need to know it, know it."[27] However, he continues, "In a country like Britain, where two-thirds of adults are on Facebook and a quarter on Twitter, one cannot ignore these media and should learn the logic of communicating through them." To address this issue Larisa Permyakova, lecturer at the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, suggests including mandatory digital diplomacy courses – both offline and online – into the Academy's educational programs for Russian diplomats[28]. Permyakova also argues that through cooperation with the private sector – such as national IT companies like Yandex, Rambler and Vkontakte – state agencies, particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, could overcome inherent inertia and internalize innovations more easily. A similar idea is shared by another scholar, lecturer at MGIMO University Elena Zinovyeva.[29] However, none of these authors elaborate how and in which specific areas this public-private partnership should develop.

In general, the Internet activity of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, apart from its website, is performed

spontaneously rather than following a certain plan. It is indicative that the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation approved in 2008 contains no mentions of the Internet. Neither is there, at least in open access, any official strategic document on use of Internet technologies in foreign policy. In official yearly surveys, the use of Internet by the Ministry is described only superficially and practically restricted to Information Support for Russian Foreign Policy.[30] In three years, from 2009 to 2011, the amount of text dedicated to this issue in surveys has not significantly increased, while official website traffic has more than quadrupled. This reflects a gap between the growing popularity of the Internet and the relatively-low priority assigned to managing it by diplomats.

A change of attitude seems to be coming from the top down. In July 2012, at a closed session of the Meeting with Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives in international organizations, President Putin emphasized that diplomats should use new technologies more actively. As reported by Kommersant, one of those who participated in that meeting explained that: "Before Vladimir Putin's speech sceptics argued that digital diplomacy was momentary [under IT-savvy Dmitry Medvedev]. However, President Putin has made it clear: only traditional methods are not enough. In any case it's necessary to master new methods."[31] Putin's understanding that the Internet matters and his interest in instrumentalizing it are relatively new. For instance, they were highlighted in November 2012, when he announced a decision to establish a fund for supporting domestic Internet projects "that have high social value."[32] Turning back to foreign policy, discussion following the July Meeting has not yet produced visible practical results. However, it was reported that the draft of the new edition of the Foreign Policy Concept prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and yet to be signed by the President, calls for a broader use of "capabilities of new technologies" for soft power goals: to create an "objective image of the country" and improve "information support" for foreign policy[33]. This provision, if approved, would be a rationale for a wider Internet presence of the Ministry and an official incentive to embrace the idea of digital diplomacy.

**Conclusions**

As the soft power concept becomes increasingly common in official Russian discourse, authorities take measures to encourage and maintain a more direct control over it in order to provide foreign policy with a new effective tool. These measures include the establishment and reorganization of state-financed agencies responsible for facilitating, funding and training internationally-oriented nongovernmental activities; assisting and directing NGOs; making traditional diplomacy more Internet-friendly. These steps are intended to improve Russia's image abroad, diversify means of foreign policy and structure Russia's soft power resource base.

On the one hand, Russia's intention to develop its soft power signifies that the government will make considerable investments to establish an institutional framework for it, fund certain projects and gradually adopt some of its features at the official level. On the other hand, the limitation of a government-centered approach is that, by delegating soft power implementation to state-controlled agencies, it may overlook the importance of nongovernmental activities as a source of the country's attractiveness. Further, whether the Russian government or nongovernmental organizations would have sufficient capacity and globally-oriented goals depends upon the wider socio-economic context. Therefore, while recent steps to shape Russian soft power are promising, it is only through modernization that the country's attractiveness will increase domestically and internationally.

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