

Almost the Same, But Not Quite (Soft): the Duality of Russian Soft Power

Written by Xuan Hung Le

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XUAN HUNG LE, JUN 29 2016

Students of Russian foreign policy often encounter difficulties when trying to conceptualise and analyse the phenomenon known as 'Russian soft power'. On the one hand, both Russian official and public discourses had adapted the use of the term 'soft power' (often translated into Russian as *мягкая сила*) in a wide variety of contexts. While references to the importance of soft power as an instrument of international relations formally appeared in an article authored by Putin in 2012 (Burlinova 2015), the establishment of institutions and agencies with the goal of promoting Russian views and international image, such as the news channel 'Russia Today' (RT) and the 'Russian World' foundation, has already begun in the mid- and late 2000s. On the other hand, from the perspective of many Western observers, Russian leaders' understanding and application of soft power seem to be inconsistent with the formulation of soft power presented by American political scientist Joseph S. Nye, the author of this concept (Nye 2013, 2014). In particular, Moscow's use of state-funded foreign language channels or influence among Russian-speaking minorities in former Soviet states to accomplish its foreign policy goals meet with strong suspicions and critiques from Western scholars and political pundits, who perceive it as "a hybrid mix of classical soft power and Soviet-style propaganda" (Conley et al. 2011: 7), or "a combination of traditional 'hard power', employing force and direct pressure, and tactical 'soft power', aimed at both undermining and overwhelming resistance" (Giragosian 2015).

Nevertheless, many scholars of International Relations continue to be preoccupied with decoding the curious case of Russian soft power. Interests in Russian influence abroad also surged in recent years due to the heightening tension between Russia and the West after the Ukrainian political crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, which raised concerns among policy-makers in the U.S. and Europe about the danger of Russian 'propaganda and information/ hybrid warfare'. Research in this area often focuses on Russia's soft power resources and effectiveness in post-Soviet countries of Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia – known as the 'near-aboard' in Russian official discourses (for example, see Cheskin 2010, Ćwiek-Karpowicz 2012, Makarychev 2015, Nielsen and Paabo 2015). On the other hand, another trend in the literature has recently emerged, which questions the extent to which Nye's concept of soft power can be applied in the context of Russian foreign policy and Russia's ambiguous position in international politics. In contrast with the first approach, this constructivist/ post-structuralist approach is interested in the reason Russian elites appropriated a Western-made concept in discourses on foreign policy and how the discursive construction of soft power can characterise Moscow's ambivalent position in a Eurocentric and hegemonic international order (Kiseleva 2015, Morozov 2015: 115-128). In this essay, I would like to argue for the application of the latter, constructivist/ post-structuralist approach in assessing Russia's use of 'soft power' in foreign policy and its successes/ failures.

Following Kiseleva's argument on the duality of Russia's soft power discourse which seeks to "both accepting and rejecting the hegemonic discourse" (Kiseleva 2015: 317) and Morozov's thesis of Russia's identity as a 'subaltern empire', whose "search for soft power is driven by normative dependency [...] an act of mimicry" (Morozov 2015: 119), in this essay, I argue that Russia's attempt to use soft power in foreign policy is both counter-hegemonic and oriented toward promoting a regional, Russo-centric hegemonic order. In other words, by framing Russian soft power as both similar and different to Nye's original concept, Russian ruling elites attempt to subvert the normative power of the West and resist co-optation into the global hegemonic order. Simultaneously, imperial legacy and a sense of

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great-powerness (великодержавность) motivated Moscow to use soft power in its own bid for a 'spheres of privileged interest' in the post-Soviet space, which led to suspicions and resistance from the intended targets of Russian soft power.

Soft Power and Hegemony

First, it would be necessary to clarify the central concepts of this essay, namely 'soft power' and hegemony. According to Joseph Nye, soft power is the ability of a country to exert influence over other countries through the use of attraction rather than military coercion and payments (Nye 2004: 5). Another name for soft power is co-optive power, or the ability to shape the preference of others by appealing to shared values and ideas (Nye 2004: 6-8). As Zahran and Ramos (2010: 12-30) and Kiseleva (2015: 319) have noted, Nye's concept of soft power can be better understood via the lens of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Hegemony refers to a political order in which domination is sustained through the use of institutions, ideas and belief framed in universalistic terms and by incorporating certain interests of underprivileged groups without undermining the dominant group's power. A hegemonic order functions via both coercion and generation of the dominated groups' active and voluntary consent (Zahran and Ramos 2010: 20-22, Kiseleva 2015: 319).

From a Neo-Gramscian perspective, Nye's concept of soft power is not only similar in theory to Gramsci's cultural hegemony, but can also be considered an instance of hegemonic discourse in international relations. Nye based the concept of soft power on his case study of the United States' global leadership dynamics, in which he noted how America's 'universalistic' culture and foreign policy of promoting shared interests and values with other countries had become the foundation of its global influence (Nye 1990: 183, 2004: 11; Zahran and Ramos 2010: 12-16). Assessing the cases of Russia and China, Nye explained what he perceived as soft power's deficits of these countries as the result of perversion from the 'standard' of the American model: "Much of America's soft power is produced by civil society [...] not from the government [...] China and Russia make the mistake of thinking that government is the main instrument of soft power" (Nye 2013). The structure of Nye's soft power is hegemonic and hierarchical; it separated nations with soft power from those with no (or little) soft power, and the ability to possess soft power is contingent on how successful a country meet the neo-liberal standard set up by the hegemon "whose dominant culture and ideas are closer to prevailing global norms [...] and whose credibility is enhanced by their domestic and international values and policies" (Nye 2004: 31-32, Kiseleva 2015: 319-320). This is reflected in some existing soft power indexes, which attempt to include criteria such as government accountability, low level of corruption, investment climate, etc., as soft power resources (Urnov 2014: 306). Nye's theory of soft power, therefore, has come to resemble a resource of America's neo-liberal soft power, a "self-fulfilling prophecy, as it arguably creates a reality it describes" (Kiseleva 2015: 319).

To borrow from Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory (which is also influenced by Gramsci's theory of hegemony), in Nye's discourse on the United States' global leadership, the term 'soft power' can be thought of as a discursive 'nodal point' – a privileged signifier or 'keyword' that is capable of assigning meanings to other signifiers in the discourse (Cheskin 2012, Rear and John 2013: 379) – which binds together other pre-existing concepts like 'culture', 'political values' and 'foreign policy' and assigns to them a new dimension as 'soft power resources'. Discourse theory also argued that discursive hegemony, such as the one attained by Nye's discourse on soft power, is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices 'which attempt to disarticulate it in order to install another form of hegemony' (Mouffe 2008: 4). Russia's use of soft power, therefore, can be defined as counter-hegemonic practices, as it seeks to challenge the hegemonic, neo-liberal interpretation of 'soft power' and presents its own country-specific version of 'soft power', with the goal of undermining Western normative power and creating a Russo-centric hegemony in the post-Soviet space.

The Duality of Russian Soft Power

Russia's use of soft power is plagued by a contradiction between the desire to obtain status recognition from the hegemonic core and the need to subvert the hegemony in order to create its own regional hegemonic order. Russian elites' appropriation of the concept of soft power reflects the role of the West as the traditional 'Other' to the Russian 'Self', whose recognition is required for legitimisation of Russia's great power status (Neumann 1996, Tsygankov

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2013: 17). It is also an illustration of Russia's identity as a subaltern (excluded from the decision-making process of the hegemonic order) whose internalised normative order still continues to be externally defined by the hegemonic core (Morozov 2015: 116). Additionally, Russia's use of soft power is motivated by the need to generate the 'active consent' necessary for establishing a regional hegemony in the post-Soviet space, or at the very least undermining the attempt to assimilate this region into the European hegemonic projects (NATO and EU). Russian ruling elites realised the danger as well as the potential of Western soft power after a series of 'colour revolutions' in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in the 2000s; and in response, Moscow began to promote the concept of 'sovereign democracy' and established institutions and agencies to disseminate its views and positions (Dias 2013). However, as a subaltern in a hegemonic order, Russia counter-hegemonic effort "has no other language to use other than the language of the hegemony" (Morozov 2015: 108) – in other words, Russian elites in their attempt to subvert the hegemony have to imitate the language of the West and constantly refer to Eurocentric norms and values, albeit with new and distorted meanings. As a result, Russia is found promoting the very same Eurocentric neo-liberal agenda, including regional integration (the Eurasian Economic Community), freedom of movement, trade liberalisation, and respect for democracy (in the 'sovereign' form), in order to compete with the normative power of the European Union in the post-Soviet space (Casier 2013: 1382).

The implications of Russia's dualistic identity for its soft power are two-fold: Russian contradictory approach prevents it from gaining the recognition of the hegemonic core, and led to suspicions and resistance from the intended recipients of Russian soft power. By adopting the language of the hegemony, Russia needs to comply with the neo-liberal standard of the West in order to successfully translate its mimicry into 'real' soft power (Kiseleva 2015: 326). Russian elites have indeed tried to imitate the successes of the West early on their pursuit of soft power: they created RT based on international news channels like BBC and CNN, employed an American company, Ketchum, to promote Russia's international image and established the 'Russian World' foundation and Rossotrudnichestvo based on the model of USAID, Germany's Goethe Institute and U.K.'s British Council (Makarychev 2015: 241). Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 and other official documents referred to soft power in wording similar to Nye's original concept and noted the importance of institutions like public diplomacy, civil society, non-governmental organisations and the education system in building soft power resources (Lavrov 2012, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013).

However, while retaining references to Western liberal values like 'freedom', 'democracy' and 'human rights', Russia's soft power discourse also presented new discursive nodal points, such as 'sovereignty', 'civilisation' and 'the Russian World', which assigned new meanings to these values and separated Russian soft power from that of the 'universalistic' Western values (Kiseleva 2015: 323). For example, Konstantin Kosachev, Chairman of the Federal Assembly's Foreign Relations Committee and former head of Rossotrudnichestvo wrote 'There are more ancient civilizational values rooted in traditions, religion and basic ethic norms [...] It is these values that rouse nations to defend their Motherland, produce national heroes, consolidate people in the years of trial and help preserve their nation after decades and even centuries of foreign yoke. These national traits certainly form the image of a nation to no less degree than democratic institutions' (Kosachev 2012). Similarly, Russian discourse distinguished 'legal' and 'illegal' uses of soft power – in the Foreign Policy Concept of 2013, for instance, illegal soft power is defined as attempts "to exert political pressure on sovereign states, interfere in their internal affairs, destabilise their political situation, manipulate public opinion" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013). Equating Western soft power with destructive propaganda, hybrid warfare and information war, Russia seeks to discredit the normative power of the West and defend the right to use similar tactics to protect its interests and sovereignty (Kiseleva 2015: 324-325). Consequently, by both accepting and rejecting the hegemonic discourse, Russian elites produced a hybridised and inconsistent discourse of soft power unrecognised by the hegemony, resulting in a struggle between Russia's and the West's narratives and uses of soft power.

Russia's imperial identity and desire for a 'sphere of influence' in the post-Soviet space also greatly affects Moscow's application of soft power. As Bobo Lo (2002: 52-52) noted, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the need to revive and reassert a sense of great-poweriness (великодержавность) – a product of Soviet and imperial legacy – gradually become the guiding principle and ideology of Russian foreign policy. At the same time, the need to project great-poweriness is reinforced by an inferiority complex and a sense of vulnerability caused by Russia's underprivileged position in the international system (Morozov 2015: 116). Russian soft power, therefore, represents an attempt at

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great-power projection and establishing a Russo-centric hegemony in the 'near abroad', the region that Moscow considers its 'spheres of privileged interest' (Trenin 2009). Such imperial ambition, unsurprisingly, tends to generate distrust rather than consent among the intended recipients of Russian soft power.

The condition upon which Russian soft power operates is also not an ideal one: many post-Soviet countries inherited unsolved territorial disputes and/or large Russian-speaking populations inside their borders. These 'frozen conflicts' and nationalist sentiments produced by them in Russia and other involved countries created a very difficult environment to develop the needed shared values for effective co-optation. Even in countries whose ruling regimes are more sympathetic toward Moscow's messages like Kazakhstan and Belarus, signs of Russian 'soft power' still managed to create suspicions among the national elites. For example, in the beginning of 2016, Kazakhstani authorities arrested a prominent pro-Russian Kazakh businessman and passed a law forbidding advertisements in foreign television channels, in effect putting restrictions on Russian language channels in the country (Radio Free Europe 2016, The Jamestown Foundation 2016). Certain parallels can be drawn between Russia's soft power in the post-Soviet space and Chinese soft power in Southeast Asia, in which unsolved territorial disputes and the perception that China is pursuing an expansionist foreign policy at the expense of its neighbours also generated distrusts and limited the successes of Beijing's soft power strategy (Kurlantzick 2007: 230-231).

Conclusion: Is Russian Soft Power Significant?

In this essay, following constructivist/ post-structuralist approach to Russian foreign policy, I argued that Russia's soft power reflects its contradictory position – comprising of both subaltern and imperial identities – in a Eurocentric hegemonic order. Constructivist/ post-structuralist approach addressed the problematic nature of Nye's concept of soft power by comparing it to Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, indicating the similarities between the two and demonstrating how 'soft power' itself can be seen as an instrument of Western neo-liberal hegemony. As a subaltern and underprivileged nation, Russia's appropriation of the concept of soft power expressed its normative dependency on the Western core, under which "a political action is only seen as legitimate if it is directed against the West (or at least demonstrates Russia's independence from the West) and fits the 'universal' norm (defined and upheld by Western hegemony) at the same time" (Morozov 2015: 128). In their use of soft power, Russian elites mimic the institutions, ideas and practices of the West, but at the same time attempts to resist Western neo-liberal discourse and introduces their own counter-hegemonic interpretation of soft power. Additionally, imperial legacy and great-power identity motivate Russian ruling elites to use soft power in their efforts to create a Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet space. Makarychev (2016) succinctly summarised this point: "Russia uses its soft power for strategic purposes in lockstep with the Kremlin's post-Soviet regional agenda: to de-legitimise the role of Western institutions and to convince neighbours to acknowledge Russian tutelage as a "natural" form of protection".

To quote Homi Bhabha's observation of colonial mimicry out of context, by imitating the discourse of the hegemony, Russia was able to create a certain kind of 'soft power', which is "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 1994: 86). By disseminating counter-hegemonic messages, Russia could capitalise on anti-neoliberal and Euro-sceptic feelings already held by many among its targeted audience. Russian foreign language news channels like RT and Sputnik are particularly effective at articulating this type of message (Yablokov 2015). At the same time, Moscow seeks to rebrand Western liberal slogans and institutions like common market, trade liberalisation and freedom of mobility under its own regional integration project – the Eurasian Economic Community, promising prosperity without the hidden strings of Western neo-imperialism. However, Russia's contradictory approach to soft power generally fails to generate the consent of many post-Soviet countries. In response, Moscow has to employ various methods of coercion to sustain its regional supremacy, but these methods also take their toll on Russia's efforts to be viewed as a post-Soviet 'benevolent hegemon'. In conclusion, Russia's ambiguous soft power will continue to be a significant force in international relations, but in an 'almost the same, but not quite (soft)' way.

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