Misinformation Disorder: Assessing Russia’s Soft Power Potential
Abstract
In 2012, President V. Putin accused western media of employing misinformation to distort Russia’s image in the international arena. In a manifesto for his third presidency, Putin labeled the alleged misinformation as a facet of western soft power. He declared that it was time for Russia to fight back by using similar tactics. Soft power in international relations, as advanced by Harvard Professor Joseph Nye, is the ability of a state to shape preferences of other states by means of appeal and attraction. The problem is that the Kremlin’s applied definition of soft power is reduced to a strict amalgamation of government crafted public diplomacy and a heavy dose of USSR style propaganda. All other variables that make a country attractive to the international community and increase soft power potential are simply omitted. The intent of this paper is to analyze the sources of Russian soft power and examine how the Kremlin utilizes soft power to influence American and Western European policy toward Russia while simultaneously increasing public opinion of Russia in western democracies.
Contents
Abstract .......................................................................................................................... Error! Bookmark not defined.
Intro ................................................................................................................................. Error! Bookmark not defined.
Theoretical Framework ................................................................................................. Error! Bookmark not defined.
  The Problem with Power ........................................................................................... Error! Bookmark not defined.
  The Concept of Soft Power ....................................................................................... Error! Bookmark not defined.
  Criticisms of the Concept ........................................................................................ Error! Bookmark not defined.
  Significance of the Concept ..................................................................................... 7
  Traditional Approach to Measuring Power ............................................................. Error! Bookmark not defined.
  Origins of Soft Power Measurement ....................................................................... Error! Bookmark not defined.
  SP30 Methodology .................................................................................................. Error! Bookmark not defined.
  Key Barriers to Entry .............................................................................................. 10
Soft Power According to the Kremlin .......................................................................... 13
  Soft Power and the USSR ...................................................................................... 14
  Putin’s Information War ........................................................................................... 15
New Wave of Russian Soft Power ................................................................................ 15
  Far Right Political Coalitions ................................................................................ Error! Bookmark not defined.
  The French Connection ............................................................................................ 16
  Western PR/Lobbying Groups ................................................................................ 18
  Purchasing Space in Western Newspapers ............................................................ 20
  Foreign Language News Channels .......................................................................... 21
  Authoritarian/Conservative Appeal ....................................................................... 23
Conclusions/Recommendations .................................................................................... 24
Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 25
Introduction

The Kremlin has gone through considerable economic pains, in the last ten years, to improve international public opinion of Russia within leading western democracies. Its efforts have focused largely on far right politicians and organizations that are opposed to the idea of the European Union, NATO, and policies unfavorable to Russia. The discussion that follows seeks to examine these efforts in detail, provide a theoretical framework in accordance with which these efforts are exerted, identify the shortcomings of the utilized approaches, and make recommendations as to how they can be improved.

The central concept of this analysis is influence and how it is created/exerted. The ability of one state to have influence upon another is a question of power. While hard power capability and its influence have been under the magnifying glass for decades (see German, Heart, Treverston, Jones)\(^1\), soft power appears to be more problematic of a concept; not only is there no way to measure the effects of soft power, the measurement of soft power potential itself lacks an agreed upon approach. Lack of a unified approach, or attempts at creating such an approach, reflects general disinterest in the concept in the field of international relations.

Dismissing academic critiques of soft power, I argue that soft power does deserve attention, if not only for the fact that the hard power approach to politics has proven disastrous in recent years. First, I introduce the concept as originally defined by Joseph Nye, review recent attempts at empirical calculation of soft power, and apply the concept to Putin’s Russia. I take issue with the methodology of existing empirical soft power analysis because the categories evaluated are too exclusive, ambiguous, and plagued with a liberal democratic bias.

Evidence exists that Russia has actively integrated soft power into its foreign policy, though its version of the concept does not very much adhere to the definition originally provided by Nye. The ultimate goal of this paper is to analyze the Kremlin’s interpretation and use of soft power and examine how it utilizes this concept to influence American and Western European policy toward Russia while simultaneously increasing public opinion of Russia within western democracies. The Kremlin’s interpretation of soft power, I argue, consists of a concentrated focus on public diplomacy/media advocacy and exclusion of almost every other aspect of the concept advanced by Nye. However, Russia’s soft power offensive is not limited to the political and digital arenas; Moscow also emits traditional religious and family values that are found appealing by conservatives in the West.

The existing strategy suffers from shortcomings and pitfalls that prevent Russia from properly cultivating its soft power potential. These problems are largely domestic and generally ignored by Putin’s administration. In the following discussion, I hope to demonstrate why exactly the barriers to soft power cultivation are neglected and why the administration has done little to change them. I conclude by making recommendations as to what alterations Russia should make to its definition of and approach to soft power to actually increase its influence abroad, and, if international public opinion of a country is at all indicative of its soft power potential, increase its largely negative image in the international arena.
Theoretical Framework

The Problem with Power

The foundation of realism is rooted in the supposition that national interest is defined in terms of national power, meaning that states in the anarchic realm secure their national interests by means of power. A perpetual problem in the field of international relations is that the notion of power lacks a proper definition. The concept has proven too complex to fit any concise definition. Realists suffer from this problem. Kenneth Waltz has acknowledged that the proper definition of power remains a controversial matter.

Constructivists are more concerned with the conceptual analysis of the question 'what does power do?' They examine the genealogy of how power has come to mean and do what it does. Despite their difference in approach, constructivists are also hard-pressed to find a descriptive meaning of power. Regardless of scholarly disagreements on precise delineation, the principle of power lies in the ability of those who hold it to make others behave in a certain way (state “A” getting state “B” to do what state “A” wants because State “A” holds more power). In international relations, power can either be expressed through brute force or through the ability to attract, persuade, or in some way influence, with an array of variations and possibilities in between the two methodologies. The subsequent discussion will focus strictly on the latter category.

![Figure 1: The Power Spectrum. Source: Value of Dissent.](image)

The Concept of Soft Power

In 1990, Harvard professor and later advisor to the Clinton administration, Joseph Nye, introduced a novel approach to the concept of power, a form of influence that he called soft power. There was nothing new about the concept, it has been around for centuries. From Lao-Tzu to Machiavelli, history books are filled with examples of soft power utilizations as a means of achieving political gain. Nye was simply the first to give it a name and embed it into a theoretical framework.

Where hard power can force target states to do things they may not want to otherwise do by threat or use of military force, soft power can attract or persuade target states by means of cultural and ideological influence, thus rendering threat/use of force unnecessary. There
is no resistance on behalf of the target state to soft power because the target state can identify with the transmitted goals and values.

Nye proposes that soft power rests on three pillars; culture, political values, and foreign policy. The first, culture, can take on several different forms, including sub categories of high and low culture. High culture refers to the fine arts and literature, things that appeal to the upper echelons of society, while movies, music, and other likes of such are low culture and appeal to the general masses. Political values can be taken to mean the ideas of societal groups and the dogmatic structures upon which they are built. Foreign policy is the way in which a state carries itself in relation to other states and is successful if it displays a high degree of moral authority and appears credible and just.2 Taking into account the nature of these three factors, it is reasonable to assume that the influence which they purportedly broadcast takes some time to grow to fruition.

Criticisms of the Concept
Nye’s concept has often been met with harsh criticism. Ferguson, using the United States as a case study, insists that it is military power and economic capacity that are entirely responsible for the United States’ hegemonic status. Guns, people, money, and oil are the prime movers in global affairs, not movies and Coca-Cola.3 Matsuda argues that even if a state is able to penetrate another with its cultural prowess, political appeal, or conduct in the international arena, does not mean that the target state is going to accept those factors entirely.4

Another problem with the concept of soft power is the absence of any uniform approach to gauge its effects on international outcomes. At this time it is very difficult to know when application of soft power has occurred and even more difficult to establish whether its application had been successful. Furthermore, soft power is very difficult to measure empirically. However, attempts at measuring soft power have been made and with some degree of success. The Soft Power 30 Index (SP30 from here on), a global ranking of soft power, is the most recent example.

Perhaps the greatest conceptual limitation of soft power, as clearly evidenced in the SP30 Index, is its democratic/capitalist bias. Nye argues that there are two conditions under which attraction is generated; first, the state must have political values that reflect universal values, and second, the state must conduct foreign policies based on these universal values. States that adhere to both factors have high soft power potential, whereas states that do not have low soft power potential. Throughout most of his work, Nye insists that liberal democratic values are the most attractive. According to Nye’s

---

definition, countries like China and Russia will not be able to generate soft power potential unless they adopt liberal practices modeled in the image of the West.

Significance of the Concept

Though its effects cannot always be gauged and it is not an ideal candidate for empirical observation, the concept of soft power warrants attention for its emphasis on cultural prowess as a means of achieving goals rather than brute force or even diplomatic coercion. Soft power deserves attention because it offers an alternative to violence and tension in the global community. Perhaps the problem is that too many in the fields of political science and international relations have shunned away from the concept, thus barring it from the due process that may otherwise yield some unexpected results.

At the very least, Nye’s concept deserves adequate attention because the other approaches to power, internationally, have resulted in less than desirable consequences. Employment of force to solve problems (Afghanistan, Iraq, & Libya) has proven to be absolutely disastrous for both users and target. The concept of soft power, though still in its infancy stages, offers at least some glimmer of hope for peaceful resolution to dangerous conflict. In regards to its strong propagation of liberal democratic values, the framework that is used to measure it (see below) could be modified to encompass states other than western democracies.

SP30 2015: Empirical Measurement of Soft Power

Traditional Approaches to Measuring Power

Historically, soft power has not received very much attention from those in the business of calculating power. Models designed to test power focused specifically on hard power capabilities. They did encompass some categories that Nye would refer to as sources of soft power, for example, economics or domestic socio-political factors, but mainly emphasized variables like weapon capabilities, military size, and energy. E. Clifford German argued that national power could be calculated with the formula $N^*(L+P+I+M)$, in which $N$ is nuclear capability, $L$ is land, $P$ is population, $I$ is the industrial base, and $M$ is military.\(^5\) Jeffery Hart then attempted to define the general approaches to measuring power, breaking his definition into 3 approaches: 1) control over events and outcomes, 2) control over resources, and 3) control over actors.\(^6\)

Hart’s approach and subsequent efforts in measuring power have not been exclusively limited to hard power. For example, Comprehensive National Power (CNP) measures both hard and soft power, taking into account natural resources, population, economic

---

\(^5\) German, “A Tentative Evaluation of World Power.”

\(^6\) Heart, “Three approaches to the measurement of power in international relations”
performance, technology, politics, military power, culture, and education. However this model is challenged by other similar indexes and the lack of common standard has prevented efforts like increasing the number of factors measured or further complicating the measurements from improving the accuracy of this calculation. The Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) focuses strictly on hard power and is comprised of 6 components: military personnel, military expenditures, iron and steel production, primary energy consumption, total population, and urban population.

The Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) focuses strictly on hard power and is comprised of 6 components: military personnel, military expenditures, iron and steel production, primary energy consumption, total population, and urban population.

**Figure 2: Breakdown of Power. Source: Voice of Dissent**

**SP30 Methodology**

IfG-Monocle was the first attempt to exclusively measure soft power in quantitative terms. It succeeded to an unprecedented extent in identifying and categorizing various sources of soft power that determine a country's potential ability to convert soft power into foreign policy influence. The significance of the study was that it combined objective metric with subjective data. Prior to the IfG-Monocle attempt at measuring soft power, public opinion polls were the standard go to in support of soft power potential. However, public opinion polls only capture perception and cannot provide objective assessment of resources, realities, and actions that constitute soft power.

SP30 builds on Nye’s pillars of soft power as well as the IfG-Monocle soft power index. It differs in that it takes into account the digital diplomacy component, that is, internet and internet related activity, and takes a more detailed approach to normalizing and computing the data. The final (soft power) score is considered as follows: combined scores of the

---


objective sub-indices (government, culture, engagement, education, economics, and digital diplomacy) and combined weighted scores of the subjective polling categories (cuisine, technological products, friendliness, culture (not quantifiable), luxury goods, foreign policy, and livability) are added resulting in a 70-30 objective-subjective index.

**Government**
First, the study takes into account a state’s government by assessing its public institutions, political values, and major public policy outcomes and measuring individual freedoms, human development, societal violence, and government effectiveness.

**Culture**
This category is intended to show the attractiveness of a country's culture and measures the total number of international tourists, average sum of money spent per tourist, number of films appearing in international film festivals, language index score, annual museum attendance, and creative goods exports.

**Enterprise**
This category focuses on the attractiveness of the country's internal market by taking into account factors such as global patents filled, WEF competitiveness score, FDI as a percentage of GDP, global innovation index score, World Bank Doing Business score, and Transparency International’s corruption index score.

**Education**
The ability of a country to attract international students is a vital tool of public diplomacy and a strong indicator of a country's soft power potential. Education is measured by the number of international students studying in the country, relevant universities, and academic output of higher education institutions.

**Engagement**
The economics sub-index captures the relative attractiveness of a country's economic model in terms of its competitiveness, capacity for innovation, and ability to foster enterprise and commerce. Innovative/competitive markets are attractive to foreign investors and thus constitute a vital instrument of soft power projection. The study acknowledges that economics can be attributed to hard power and explicitly states that the goal here is not to measure economic output, but rather to assess value, quality, and outcomes including innovation, entrepreneurship, and competiveness.

**Digital Diplomacy**
Every other category analyzed in the study has been changed or in some way effected by technology, foreign policy included. Digital diplomacy falls under the technology umbrella, and plays an important role in calculation of soft power potential. The analysis captures the extent to which countries have embraced technology in two categories: connectivity to the digital world and use of digital diplomacy.11

---

Figure 3. Countries with highest soft power potential, calculated based on the framework outlined above. Russia is not on the list. Source: SP30 Index.

Russia’s Key Barriers to Entry to SP30
Despite the efforts Moscow has invested into improving its image in the international sphere, especially in western democracies, it has been unable to secure a position on the
SP30 Index. The exclusion may likely be attributed to Russia's hostilities in Ukraine, the sanctions that ensued, and a seeming inability to work with the West in solving the Syria crisis which in turn yielded lower rankings in education (number of international students decreased), engagement (number of international investors decreased), culture (number of tourists decreased), and enterprise (on account of Russia’s widespread and deeply penetrating corruption).

![ Corruption Index 2006-15](image)

*Figure 4: Corruption Index 2006-15, Russia has the poorest score over the course of 10 years, it appears to be more corrupt than Turkey, Mexico, and China, the last three positions on the SP30 Index. Source: Transparency International.*

Another factor standing in the way of Russia’s inclusion into SP30 is its strict censorship. Television, Russia’s primary source of information, is a medium almost entirely monopolized by the government. Non-government affiliated stations have little room to navigate in the spectrum of public television, constantly under threat of being labeled foreign agents and imposition of unreasonable taxes that come with such labels. The internet, not as pervasive as television, radio, or talking to others, but nonetheless a considerable source of information for Russia, is also heavily censored.

In addition to rampant corruption and censorship, other internal factors that block Russia's soft power cultivation capacity include high homicide rates, unemployment, low academic output, homelessness, social inequality, and instability. To appear attractive abroad and influence international actors without much effort, as proposes the traditional definition of soft power, a country needs to provide conditions in which citizens can prosper, thrive, and
create. Russia suffers from a multitude of problems that prevent its citizenry from prospering and creating. See Politovskaya, Nemtsov, Dashiwa, and Milov for in depth analysis of Russia’s domestic problems.12

![Primary Sources of Information in Russia]

*Figure 5 Television is Russia’s primary Source of Information. Source: World Values Survey*

![Russia's internet is censored. Source: Freedom House]

*Figure 6: Russia's internet is censored. Source: Freedom House*

---

Despite Russia’s obvious domestic problems, worth considering is the fact that the SP30 Index, not unlike the explanation of soft power provided by Joseph Nye, suffers from a lack of objectivity. Factors included in the SP30 Index are biased in favor of western democracies/capitalist states, this can be inferred from the fact that sub-indices like individual freedoms and a focus on the attractiveness of a country’s internal market are used as criteria to measure a state’s soft power. A country of Russia’s caliber, clearly not democratic and not known for promotion of individual freedoms, is inherently restricted from entering the SP30.

**Soft Power According to the Kremlin**

Perhaps Russian soft power capacity should be measured according to a different scale and definition. After all, shaping the preferences of others, which is the ultimate goal of soft power, can be done in a variety of ways, it does not necessarily need to be attraction. Ability to persuade and influence can also have an impact on shaping the preferences of others, it is simply a different means to achieving similar ends.

Historically, Russia has always prided itself on being different from the West. Russia has taken its own path to modernity, politics, religion, culture, etc. The case of Russian soft power is no different. Instead of combating internal problems in order to increase soft power potential, Putin’s administration has focused its efforts on public diplomacy aimed at the West. They have done so for two reasons; first to increase Russia’s image in western democracies and second to influence foreign policy of those democracies toward Russia.

The following sections are dedicated to the exploration of the Kremlin’s interpretation of soft power and its subsequent employment in the global sphere. Specifically, I aim to 1) examine USSR’s soft power potential as opposed to that of modern day Russia 2) determine Putin’s definition of soft power, 3) highlight techniques employed by Putin’s administration in exercising the soft power offensive abroad, and 4) make recommendations as to how Russia’s soft power potential assessment can be improved.

**Soft Power and the USSR**

Van Herpen argues that until recently, the Kremlin has not paid very much attention to the concept of soft power. Nye’s cornerstone work on the subject of soft power- *Bound to Lead*—is yet to be translated into Russian, and until 2000, the concept was not referenced anywhere in the *East View Universal Database*, the largest repository of journals and newspapers available in the Russian language.

Russia’s evident lack of concern for soft power does not imply that Russia has had no experience with it. On the contrary, the Soviet Union was a powerhouse of soft power dissemination. Nye explains that the dynamic force of soft power is attraction. Despite the negative position it occupies in the collective and individual memories of the West, the
Soviet Union appealed to and attracted many in the international community. Even those in the West cannot deny the fact that the Soviet Union had some distinctive advantages.

“The Soviet Union offered an alternative to the bourgeois civilization and quite a number of people would long view it as a rising ideal society, for which they were ready to sacrifice their lives.”

Soviet women had more opportunities in employment and politics then did those in the West. The government actively sponsored artistic and cultural pursuits; films of the Soviet Union received high praise by the international community. The state likewise promoted advancements in science, technology, and space exploration; launching Yuri Gagarin into the cosmic realms set an aspirational international mark. Education was free and of a considerable quality. The Soviet Union identified with popular decolonization movements in third world countries and invested heavily into foreign aid.

Yet the well of soft power began to dry up and at the end of the sixties plunged into a steady decline. The beginning of the decline was marked in 1968, by an uprising by what was then Czechoslovakia. Alexander Dubchek, a Slovak politician, attempted to blend democracy and socialism, easing central planning, censorship, and secret police activity. Not long after Dubchek pulled his democratic stunt, Soviet Union soldiers occupied Czechoslovakia and put an end to the proposed reforms, crushing the dreams and shattering the illusions of those who believed in the communism ideal. As history progressed through the seventies and into the eighties, advancements on nearly all afore mentioned fronts halted, and the Soviet system stagnated under the weight of its shortcomings until 1990, when it finally collapsed.

The Soviet Union had an ideology that resonated with the third world struggle and the working class of the West, a sort of moral influence for those who did not experience Soviet communism from within. It appealed to Europeans, particularly those in France, who fought against the Nazis in the Second World War. It appealed to the countries of Africa because it held the promise of decolonization. It appealed to Latin America as well, namely Cuba, whose commodities the Soviet Union purchased at unreasonably high prices. The Russia of today resembles little of the Soviet Union in terms of ideology and appeal.

Putin’s Info War
The prevailing notion in Russia has been that the West, especially the United States, is actively conducting a propaganda campaign against it for the purposes of its containment. Evidence used by the Russian elites to justify this supposition comes in form of largely negative international public opinion of Russia. To anyone familiar with Russian political history, it should come as no surprise that Putin does not see the Russia’s negative image in the world as a result of immanent flaws of the Russian political system, but instead blames western governments for distorting global perceptions of Russia by presenting the world with inaccurate and misconstrued information about the country.

In a manifesto for his third presidency, published in the Moskovskie Novosti in 2012, Putin addresses the concept of soft power, “...a complex of instruments and methods to achieve foreign policy objectives without the use of weapons, which include the use of information and other means.”  

He goes on to say that certain entities skilled in the art of soft power, namely foreign agents disguised as NGOs operating within Russia, have misused the concept for nefarious ends for far too long, and that it is time for Russia to develop “its own soft power arsenal in order to prevail in this zero-sum power game.” Information, declared Putin, will be the primary weapon in this new struggle.

A parallel can be drawn, though not entirely symmetrical, between the stagnating USSR of the 1980s and the European Union of 2016. The idea of the European Union is losing popularity among many European nations, this is confirmed by the fact that the political far right is on the rise all throughout the region. In the late 1980s, few within the Soviet Union really believed in the idea of communism. The internal disintegration was enhanced by creeping westernization that snuck underneath the iron curtain in form of American clothing cigarettes, music, film, etc.

An argument can be made that Russia is currently trying to exert a similar type of influence on the European Union. However, Russia is not doing so by producing popular technological artifacts, world renowned film and music, or marketing its political values. Russia is trying to influence the West by directing its informational offensive, defined by the Kremlin as soft power, against the concept of the EU and reinforcing conditions in which right wing movements can grow. Thus, Russia hopes to speed up the disintegration of the European community.

New Wave of Soft Power Employed by Putin’s Administration

Though the concept of soft power was not officially christened in Russia until Putin's 2012 Moskovskie Novisty article, the creation of institutions and firms aimed at promoting Russian views and improving the largely negative international perception of Russia started somewhere around the beginning of Putin’s second presidency in the mid-2000s. As Russia’s behavior in the international arena became more alarming to western democracies, the Kremlin's soft power offensive intensified.

Far Right Political Coalitions

Russia has deployed an array of financial means to influence western policy and this has included extending donations and providing fees for services or loans to (right wing) politicians. Though this practice has been very difficult to monitor, it is in fact a highly controversial topic in France and presumably UK and Germany as well. It comes as no

---

15 Vladimir Putin, “Rossiya I menyaschchiysya mir” (Russia and the Changing World), Moskovskie Novosti (February, 2012).
16 Putin, “Rossiya I menyaschchiysya mir”
surprise that recipients of this money are politicians opposed to NATO and the European Union, “two institutions defending the values of a certain European and trans-Atlantic order that the Kremlin sees as opposed to its interests.” Some of these loans have been channeled through western-based but Russian-affiliated banks. Recipients of these loans have also been welcomed in Russia to give paid talks where they defend security policies more in line with Russia’s than with their own governments.

Paying for western support does not exactly coincide with the traditional definition of soft power. More often, the support is costless and voluntary by the weaker side. However, Russia’s lack of adherence to the traditional definition should at this point be well noted. Certainly, the Kremlin understands the limitations of its soft power in the traditional sense; Putin is clever enough to understand that people in the West are not just going to go along with Moscow’s agenda. Instead, Putin’s administration attempts to exploit the fear, uncertainty, and populism evolving in countries of the European Union by supporting actors who have rallied their campaigns around those very factors.

The coalition of parties working with the Kremlin and directly or indirectly receiving money from it is not strictly limited to far right organizations/movements; regional separatist movements are on Moscow’s payroll as well. Ideology is not the common ground here. Rather, the seemingly unlikely cooperation is driven by opposition to Europe’s current foreign and security policies, especially as they pertain to NATO, the European Union, Russia and Ukraine. “In their zero sum world view, anything that weakens NATO or the European Union or governments that support these institutions provides an advantage to Russia.”

The French Connection
The French National Front, under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, received 9 million Euro for the 2014 election campaign from a Russian-Czech bank. Le Pen stated that the political organization was forced to seek foreign financial aid on account of the fact that French banks have refused to extend her credit. The bank through which the credit line was established belongs to Genadiy Timichensko, a businessman who is currently on the U.S. and EU sanctions list. Le Pen insists that there is nothing illegal nor unorthodox about these types of monetary transactions and denies that the extension of credit is an act of lobbying on behalf of Russia. As far as the party is concerned, there is no link between the crediting bank and Putin. Furthermore, National Front representatives insist that the credit will be repaid in full.

---

Political scientist Stanislav Belkovski disagrees, claiming that the French National Front is not a commercial organization and will not be generating the type of revenue needed to pay back the loan. He believes that the bank does have an affiliation with Moscow, and even though there is no way to legally prove it, the Kremlin had sanctioned the credit extension. He argues that this is a form of endorsement on behalf of Moscow of ideas propagated by the National Front, a Eurosceptic nationalist party that has opposed the EU since its treaty became law in 1993. French magazine *Nouvel Observateur* has on multiple occasions explored the link between the National Front and the Kremlin, suggesting that Le Pen is a regular at functions held in the Russian embassy in Paris.

Leaders of the French National Front have shown support for Putin and his behavior in the international arena, including the annexation of Crimea. Le Pen insisted that the results of the referendum on the status of Crimea were impossible to dispute, while her father Jean-Mari Le Pen, founder of the National Front in France, claimed that “Crimea was always a part of the Russian Empire.” Belkovski concludes that the generous loan to Le Pen’s party is a reward for promoting pro-Russian interests in France and opposing the membership in the European Union. In early 2016, the party officially confirmed that it would be seeking at the very minimum 27 million Euro for the 2017 presidential and parliamentary campaigns. The party is hoping to once again receive help from Russia.

In 2015, Marine Le Pen successfully oversaw the creation of the Eurosceptic far right faction in the European Parliament called Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF). Members of this group relentlessly push pro-Russian agenda and support interests of the Kremlin, meanwhile denying any affiliation of interest between their respective organizations and Moscow. EMF is at this time only 5 percent of the MEP (751), but already it gathered more than 25 members, thus successfully securing previously unavailable rights and powers, as well as a significant budget.

It is very possible that Russia’s popularity is increasing all across the European political right even without funding from Moscow. Putin’s leadership skills and Russia’s defying behavior are viewed as attractive by fringe parties disillusioned with the pro EU, pro political correct, liberalist tendencies of the West today. And not only the right; leftist parties such as Syriza in Greece, also have leanings toward Russia. They oppose the expansion of economic sanctions against Russia and while believing that remaining in

---


22 “French Ultra-Right...” *BBC News*

23 “French Ultra-Right...” *BBC News*


NATO is in Greece’s best interest, have expressed frustration with the organization. Another left wing pro-Russian party is Spain’s Podemos.26

As tensions within the European Union grow, agents interested in preserving the European community are desperately looking to expose what they see as Russia’s nefarious involvement. However, nothing outside the parameters of legality has yet been discovered. “The Russian campaign exists in a grey area, operating covertly-and often legally-to avoid political blowback, but with the clear aim of weakening western will to fight, maturing doubts over NATO, the EU, Trident and economic sanctions.”27

Western PR/Lobbying Groups
Another example of the Kremlin’s soft power offensive is the hiring of western PR and lobbying firms to influence western decision makers and improve Russia’s image abroad. Van Herpen refers to this practice as “reputation laundering.”28 Non-governmental organizations such as churches, business groups, and lobbying firms can have a significant influence in shaping national policies. The lobbying groups are of particular influence, because they employ former politicians who have direct links to the political establishment. By 2007, “Moscow ha[d] already enlisted extremely influential lobbyists [...] including former U.S. Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and James Baker, who has worked as a consultant for Gazprom and Russia’s pipeline monopoly Transneft.”29

In 2006, Russia had yet another disagreement with Ukraine (historically, this has been a reoccurring phenomenon) and as a result cut off its gas supply. In the same year, Moscow banned gay pride marches and subjected homosexuals to repeat attacks by angry nationalists. To deal with the bad international reputation, Putin hired a New York-based firm called Ketchum for a total of $2 million dollars. The firm threw together some podcasts, invited some western journalists to St. Petersburg, and proclaimed that it had successfully showed Russia’s democratic nature to the West.30 Gallup data suggests that the overall positive opinion of Russia in the U.S. actually decreased from 2006 to 2007, but the Kremlin appeared to be satisfied anyway. In 2007, Russia renewed the contract with Ketchum and soon after Putin was named by Time Magazine as “Person of the Year.” Between 2006 and 2009, Ketchum and its affiliate, the Washington Group, were paid somewhere around $14 million for their services.

28 Marcel Van Herpen, Putin’s Propaganda Machine (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016)
Figure 2: U.S. Public Opinion of Russia continued to decline after Ketchum’s services were retained.\textsuperscript{31}

In addition to hiring international lobbying firms, the Kremlin has organized international forums at which experts in the fields of political science, international relations, and specifically Russia can meet with Russian counterparts and enjoy unabridged dialogue. One such forum is the Valdai Discussion Club. The first meeting was organized in 2004 and served three primary objectives: it created an illusion of openness and free speech, allowed Russian elites to network with western intellectuals, and at the same time served as a testing ground for Kremlin’s future foreign policy advancements. Intellectuals were encouraged to criticize Putin’s administration and provide feedback as to how it could perform better. They were also encouraged to ask daring questions.\textsuperscript{32}

One theory is that Putin tested the grounds to see just how far he could push the West, based on questions and responses provided by the unsuspecting guests. Another is that the Valdai session allowed for the possibility to fine tune the Kremlin’s developing information offensive. In both cases, Putin and his entourage had successfully established connections with representatives from Europe and the United States. Though many international observers felt the conference was distasteful and wrote it off as a blatant propaganda attempt by the Kremlin, participants left the conference feeling like a breakthrough in world practice had been made.\textsuperscript{33} Since then, Valdai Club has become an annual, sometimes even monthly, event that includes participants not only from prestigious western institutions such as Harvard, Georgetown, University College London, and the London School of Economics, but from all over the world. Some other notable academic

\textsuperscript{31} http://www.gallup.com/poll/1642/russia.aspx

\textsuperscript{32} Van Herpen

\textsuperscript{33} Tim Wall, “Putin’s De Gaulle Moment,” \textit{The Moscow News} (November 14, 2011)

establishments represented at Valdai include Cairo University, Tel Aviv University, and the University of Tehran.

Purchasing Space in Western Newspapers
Another soft power offensive was initiated in 2007 when “Russia beyond the Headlines” first made its entrance into the global media front. It consists of eight page newspaper supplements by The Russian Paper and is called Russian World. The supplement appears once a month in a number of influential western papers, including The New York Times and The Washington Post in the United States, The Telegram in England, Le Figaro in France, El País in Spain, Repubblica in Italy, and Suddeutsche Zeitung in Germany. The supplements are characterized by a layout that is very much similar to the actual paper and a focus on a wide array of themes untainted by pro-Russian propaganda. In many instances, the Kremlin is actually criticized.34

The intent of the Russian World publication is to convince the audience they are reading a western paper. This is done for two reasons: first “to diminish [the audience’s] cognitive dissonance by adapting the contents and the style of the articles to fit their ‘critical’ western mind”, and then to indirectly channel information to the broader public via the individuals who take the time to read the eight page segment. The articles critical of the Kremlin, for example, create the idea that Russia is a liberal society where censure of the government is a perfectly acceptable practice, an idea that sits well in the minds of western readers. 35

The most blatant intrusion into the U.S. newspaper scene may have come on September 11, 2013. American audiences may recall an op-ed penned by Vladimir Putin in The New York Times that ridiculed the United States for intervening in various conflicts around the globe and urged the Obama administration to abstain from involvement in Syria. Putin, emerging as the voice of peace and reason, outlined the disastrous consequences that would ensue in the wake of American involvement in Syria.36 According to The Guardian, the content was brought to The New York Times by none other than Ketchum, the PR group recruited by Putin.

Putin’s stunt in The New York Times falls more in line with Nye’s definition of soft power than paying off European nationalists. In this case, the diplomats are bypassed entirely and the message is aimed directly at the American public. This is done with the intent of connecting with those readers who want to avoid involvement in questionable military activities, which in the recent past have cost the American public dearly. Even people who do not much care for Putin or Russia may find this message in tune with their beliefs. At

34 Van Herpen
35 Van Herpen
the very least, it leaves a subconscious imprint of the notion that on some level, Americans and Russians are not so different.

Foreign Language News Channels
Prime examples of Russia’s institutionalization of soft power are the broadcasted English language news sources providing expert discussion on matters pertinent in the West. These include Russia Today (RT), Sputnik News, and Ria-Novosty. The goal of these news outlets is to improve Russia’s image abroad and to stress Russia’s positive points and modernization efforts. At the same time, the networks report on the negative side of the West, covering topics such as homelessness, unemployment, and human rights violations.

The most popular of these channels is by far Russia Today (RT). It offers programming in multiple languages including English, Spanish, Arabic, and Hindi. RT enjoys one of the largest audience bases of any global news broadcaster and its YouTube channel was the first in history to receive over a billion hits. As of December 20, 2016, RT has over 4 billion hits.\(^{37}\) The channel markets itself as an alternative to Al Jazeera and Vice News and maintains an edgy profile with provocative taglines like “question more” and “question everything.” It has an annual budget of over $300 million.\(^{38}\)

Julia Ioffe, writing for the Columbian Journalism Review, argues that the channel “was conceived as a soft-power tool to improve Russia’s image abroad, to counter the anti-Russian bias the Kremlin saw in the western media.” Russia, she continues “…is still desperately trying to fend off stereotypes of itself - the endemic corruption, the whimsical autocracy of the state - that have kept much foreign capital, and many Russian émigrés, from returning.”\(^{39}\)

Washington Post insists that “RT is implementing a sophisticated YouTube program that targets specific messages at well-defined audiences.”\(^{40}\) Analysis of 2,695 videos during a one month period in 2015 revealed that 75% of RT America videos and 81% of views were U.S. centered, while in Europe (RT France and RT Germany), Ukraine coverage and anti-EU programming dominated the stream. Analysis suggested that the American and UK channels were less popular than those in Europe, leading the authors to conclude that the network had given up targeting those audiences specifically, but not the international English language audience.\(^{41}\) The study is far too small to lead to any definitive conclusions, but it does reveal that the messages RT is sending are region specific.

\(^{37}\) Rt.com
\(^{40}\) Orttung, Nelson, Livshen, “How Russia Today is using YouTube”
\(^{41}\) Orttung, Nelson, Livshen, “How Russia Today is using YouTube”
If there remains any doubt as to who owns RT, Putin himself clears up any ambiguity. In an interview with the network, Putin confesses that in 2005, he envisioned a competent information outlet that would not only provide unbiased coverage of events in Russia and in the world, but “try to break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams.”

He claims in the interview that the channel was never intended to be a mouthpiece for the Russian government, but considering the fact that it is funded by Moscow cannot help but reflect to some degree its official position.

Sputnik News is another, less popular, Kremlin owned international news outlet. The outlet focuses on global politics and economics and generally caters to non-Russian audiences. Sputnik’s newswire service runs 24/7, operates in over 30 languages and has regional editorial offices in Washington, Cairo, Beijing, London, and Edinburgh. Like RT and Ria-Novosti, another Kremlin sponsored counterpart serving a similar purpose, Sputnik News has been accused of fabrication, disinformation, and bias.

Well respected and outspoken Russian journalist, film director, and politician, Alexander Nevrozov, dismisses RT, Sputnik, and other Russian sources of mass information aimed at

---


43 Fisher

44 Sputniknews.com
spreading Kremlin propaganda abroad as journalistically inadmissible trash. In a November 2016 interview for Radio Station Exo Moskvi (Echo of Moscow), Nevrozov discusses propaganda, classifying it into categories of successful and unsuccessful. The SMIs Moscow utilizes to push its agenda abroad, according to Nevrozov, undoubtedly fall in the latter category. He refers to RT, Sputnik, and the Russian World newspaper supplements as blatant examples of unskillful, amateur propaganda of the poorest and most indigestible quality.45

Authoritarian/Conservative Appeal
Abundant evidence suggests that Russia is trying to increase its soft power globally by buying or creating international news outlets, keeping western nationalists on their payroll, and engaging in all manners of non-traditional soft power cultivation. Yet Russia’s utilization of soft power stretches beyond the obvious efforts. The Kremlin has an appeal that resonates with authoritarian leaders and conservative publics world-wide; these are important factors that future research on Russian soft power must absolutely address.

Putin is a strong, authoritative figure who does as he pleases, utterly disregarding the rules and standards of the international community. It is not difficult to see why leaders like Bashar al-Assad and Rodrigo Duterte seek Putin’s patronage and gravitate closer to Russia. However, it is harder to explain why ordinary citizens, even in countries such as the United States, might identify with Russia. Nye argued that liberal democratic values are the primary driving factors in the ability to attract. Yet his emphasis on the liberal-democratic aspects serves as a great obstruction to evaluating attraction of non-democratic states.

Putin has been very critical of LGBT rights; in Russia LGBT rights do not exist. He has made himself out to be a strong proponent of the traditional family system and has, with the help of the Russian lawmaking apparatus, successfully banned anything that is even mildly interpreted as homosexual. Western media denounced Putin for such actions, but many in the West, be they conservative, religious, or otherwise prejudiced against non-traditional values, applauded Putin’s decision. This particular piece of legislation demonstrates that soft power does not have to stem from liberal beliefs and can very well be produced by conservative values.

Conclusions and Recommendations
If Russia is to be judged in accordance with the SP30 Index, it will always fail, because the index is biased and does not capture “non-western” forms of soft power. Yet Russia is still sought out by countries like Venezuela, Vietnam, and Syria, therefore it does have some attraction. Here it is important to look at the history of these states as it pertains to the Soviet Union. It is also important to look at the political systems in those states and the

values of the people that reside within them. In the eyes of the West and the corresponding SP30 Index, Russia does not hold very much soft power potential, but if public opinion is any indicator of soft power influence, then Russia is quite a bit more affluent in China, Vietnam, and other “less democratic” states. A more encompassing empirical study of soft power should take into account history between the compared states, language, religion, and values.

Russia can increase its soft power potential according to the traditional, western definition, but it will have to concentrate its efforts on internal issues like corruption, unemployment, and general stagnation of Russian culture. At the present, majority of the Russian population rallies behind Putin, and that support is crucial to his power. However, if the situation at home continues to worsen, support for Putin will likely decline, and that means his domestic legitimacy will decline. If legitimacy comes into question, Putin and his circle of Medvedevs may find themselves in a position where international influence is entirely outside the realm of possibility.

The effects of the soft power offensive launched by Putin at the dawn of his third presidency remain to be seen. It seems that his efforts have been opportunist in nature, exploiting the weakness of the European Union and political instability elsewhere in the West, and so far they have been rather successful. With the triumph of Trump in the 2016 United States Presidential Elections and Marine Le Pen’s increasing popularity in France, it seems that the seeds of frustration exploited by the political right are beginning to come to fruition.

Russia wants the political right to be represented in the governments of western democracies, so that they would push pro-Russian, anti-EU/anti-NATO foreign policy, like lifting sanctions against Russia. Another reason for the support is to destabilize society and political structures in the countries in question. However, all of these efforts will prove meaningless if Russia is unable to take advantage of them on account of a deteriorating domestic situation. Attention to problems at home will not only allow Russia to harness soft power potential according to western standards, but become a considerable player in the international arena, one that will not need to resort to propaganda tactics alone in order to prove its legitimacy and importance to the West.

Bibliography


[http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_11886](http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_11886)


[http://softpower30.portland-communications.com](http://softpower30.portland-communications.com)


Nevrosov, Alexander. *Personally Yours, November 2016*,


Polakow-Suransky, Sasha. “The ruthlessly effective rebranding of Europe's new far right.” *The Guardian*, November 2016,
[https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/01/the-ruthlessly-effective-rebranding-of-europes-new-far-right](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/01/the-ruthlessly-effective-rebranding-of-europes-new-far-right)


World Values Survey, worldvaluessurvey.org