

RUSSIA'S SEMI-SOFT POWER

This article offers an analysis of Russia's soft power which, given the state of today's international developments, may be better thought of as Russia's semi-soft power. Tracing the evolution of Russia's soft power politics and instruments since the early 2000s, it highlights the three stages of this development, giving detailed characteristics of each. The paper argues that Russia's soft power strategy has most notably manifested itself in the work of the television channel Russia Today and the Immortal Regiment event, which now regularly takes place on 9 May, Victory Day. In conclusion, the article states that the current version of the country's soft power, despite all contradictions, still furthers Russian geopolitical interests.

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On 11 August 2020, the pandemic afflicted world was informed that Russia had registered the first COVID-19 vaccine. The two-component vector vaccine GAM-COVID-VAK has been developed at the N Gamaleya Research Centre for Epidemiology and Microbiology. It has been trademarked as Sputnik V with the intention to draw a direct analogy with the other famous accomplishment of Soviet science and engineering. Akin to the first launch of an orbiting artificial satellite in human history, Russia became the first country to take practical steps aimed at vaccinating people against the new Coronavirus. The fact that the Sputnik vaccine received temporary registration well ahead of the third phase of clinical trials, indicated that the time factor, the desire to get ahead of competitors and earn a favourable international resonance were important to Russian authorities. Along with the beginning of the mass vaccination of its own population and the promotion of the vaccine in foreign markets, the development of the vaccine is also regarded as a substantial contribution in strengthening Russia's soft power.

The Russian approach to soft power has many distinctive perspectives that have been widely discussed in literature. (Tomila Lankina and Kinga Niemczyk, “Russian Foreign Policy and Soft Power” in David Cadier and Margot Light (Eds), *Russian Foreign Policy: Ideas, Domestic Institutions and External Relations*, New York: Palgrave, 2015; Peter Rutland and Andrey Kazantsev, “The Limits of Russia’s ‘Soft Power’”, *Journal of Political Power*, vol9, no3, 2016, pp395–413 and Marcel H van Herpen, *Putin’s Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016) First, it should be noted that there are some terminological difficulties stemming from the fact that the English term “power” may be translated into Russian in two ways—*sila*, (the ability to carry out action) and *vlast* (the right and capacity to impose one’s will on others). However, it is evident that in talking about soft power, Joseph S Nye (“Soft Power”, *Foreign Policy*, no80, Autumn 1990, p153–71) had the latter in mind—the capacity to achieve one’s objectives through a certain set of means. It was about “how to make others want what we want” without resorting to blatant coercion, that is, by offering appealing incentives to prompt them to act in our interests.

In addition, there are certain specificities in official documents defining soft power as an instrument for foreign policy influence, which is increasingly becoming more confrontational. This approach is supported in pronouncements by President Vladimir Putin, (“Rossiia i Meniaiushchikhsia Mir/ Russia and the Changing World”, *Moskovskie Novosti*, 29 February 2012, online at <http://www.mn.ru>) in his understanding of soft power “as a complex of tools and methods to achieve foreign policy goals without the use of force, through information and other means of influence”. It is also reflected in his belief that Russia’s rivals resort to these methods “to encourage and provoke extremism, separatism, nationalism, manipulation of public sentiment and outright interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states”. Although such instrumentality in understanding “soft power” is a common characteristic of the Russian approach, it is, nevertheless, possible to trace its evolution and relate it to the qualitative changes in Russia’s domestic and foreign policies. The official Russian politics of soft power has evolved through three distinct phases, as detailed below.

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THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIA'S SOFT POWER POLITICS

The First Period

The first period in the development of Russia's soft power was from the mid-2000s to August 2008. The reception in Moscow of Joseph Nye's ideas on soft power resulted in official foreign policy priorities increasingly considering this approach. The impetus was the colour revolutions across the post-Soviet space including the 2003 Revolution of Roses in Georgia and the 2003–04 Orange Revolution in the Ukraine. These were both perceived by Moscow as dangerous challenges to Russian geopolitical interests and victories of the West achieved without harsh coercive means. Correspondingly, Russian politics at the time, projected soft power resources onto the post-Soviet space, pursuing such goals as support of Russian ethnic minorities and the Russophone populations abroad in countries that had emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and in strengthening ties with fellow countrymen in the "far abroad". Until Putin's speech at the Munich Conference on 10 February 2007, soft power politics was regarded as a counterweight but not a deep systemic confrontation with the correspondent strategies of the United States of America (US) and the European Union (EU) in a region vitally important for Russia. Even after Munich, there was no immediate transition to confrontation in soft power relations. Rather, the focus shifted towards a criticism of the West's double standards. Concurrently, Russia sought to strengthen its soft power instruments. In light of the Putin's Munich speech, the goal was to present Russia as a more honest (in comparison with the West) international actor and not an outsider rejecting basic human values and cultural codes.

In terms of the institutional mechanisms of soft power, the most important decisions of the first period were the establishment of a multi-lingual television channel *Russia Today* in 2005 and the creation of the foundation Russian World in 2007. The latter has the status of a nongovernmental organisation, which promotes Russian culture and language abroad. However, from inception to the present day, Russian World has been financed by the government and is headed by the well-known political expert and member of the State Duma, Vyacheslav Nikonov (a grandson of Stalin's People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Vyacheslav Molotov). Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the

responsibility for soft power matters lay, up to 2008, with the Russian Centre for International Cultural and Scientific Cooperation. The international discussion club Valdai, established in 2004, is another innovative instrument of soft power. Along with opportunities for informal contacts, a key factor of this project's success is that it gives leading Russian and foreign experts a chance to communicate directly with President Putin. The main characteristic feature of this communication is not just the presentation of new products of analytical work to the Russian leader but is also an opportunity to find out Putin's position on a wide range of international and domestic issues. Evidently, this feature of the club's format, helped prove Putin's competitiveness in a tacit rivalry with the Yaroslavl political forum (held in 2009, 2010 and 2011), where Dmitry Medvedev was the principal newsmaker.

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The Second Period

The second period in the development of Russian soft power politics coincided with Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, when the modernisation rhetoric dominated public discourse in the country. Specifically, it was a time-span from August 2008 to September 2011, between a five-day war with Georgia and Putin's announcement of again running for the presidency. While developing an alternative to Western soft power politics remained on the agenda, the main thrust shifted to mitigating, through the soft power instruments, the psychological consequences of the military intervention in Georgia and South Ossetia and support of the secession of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Essentially, the task was to bolster the "reset" process in Russia–US relations and the Partnership for Modernisations initiative, endorsed by the leaders of Russia and the EU. In this period, the use of soft power instruments was supposed to underscore the fundamental common denominators in culture and basic values but not overshadow the differences in interests, with the strategic partnership remaining the highest priority.

Meanwhile, the presence in the Russian political space of the two political leaders—Medvedev and the more influential Putin with different discursive strategies—created a situation of ideological polyphony which to an extent manifested itself in the projections of Russian soft power. Among other things, it found expression in the activities of a number of expert organisations. In addition to the Valdai club and the Yaroslavl political forum, are think tanks like the Institute of Contemporary Development and the Institute for Public Projects, which present analytical products with the use of public relations (PR) technologies. The think tanks have developed into serious actors in the ideological-symbolic space, advancing their own versions of ways to interpret social reality.

In the discourse on modernisation, an idea that has gained popularity, is the assertion that there are no viable alternatives to modernisation or that all theoretically possible alternatives are unacceptable. In this respect, the foreign policy chapter of the pro-Medvedev Institute of Contemporary Development created quite a sensation. In the 2010 report *Twenty-First Century Russia: The Image of Tomorrow We Want*, it indicated the following objectives of modernisation in Russia—the country’s accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); obtaining the status of a strategic ally of the EU with the prospect of becoming a full member; forming a strategic partnership with the US reached through fundamental agreements in matters of strategic stability with a balance of interests across the post-Soviet space and collaboration in the Asia–Pacific, Middle East and the countries of the Muslim world. However, what remained obscure in all this was the role of Russia in the post-Soviet space. Evidently, if Russian authorities had followed these recommendations, it would have redefined the country’s soft power strategies. For their part, the experts of the institution had called for taking into consideration the opinions of Russian society and elites as well as of elites in the countries with which it would collaborate. Inter alia, this resulted in an expert public council being considered with the task of effectively disseminating information on the country’s foreign policy. (“Obretenie Boudoushego/Attaining the Future”, *Strategy 2012*, Institut Sovremennogo Razvitiya/Institute of Contemporary Development, Moscow, 2011, pp292–4, online at <http://www.insor-russia.ru>) An important step in this direction was the establishment in 2010 of the Russian Council on International Affairs, a new think tank aimed at broader engagement with the international expert community.

The central event of the Medvedev period in the development of the

country's soft power politics was the establishment in 2008 of the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo), an autonomous governmental agency under the jurisdiction of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The initial concept of the agency and its mandate and targeted audience had been defined in the preceding period of Russia's soft power politics. Its setting up may be considered a sign of the increasing recognition of the need to establish a network of communities that could be organised and mobilised to promote Russian culture and language as well as represent Russian interests in host countries. (Yelena Osipova, "'Russification' of 'Soft Power': Transformation of a Concept", *Exchange: The Journal of Public Diplomacy*, vol5, no1, 2014, pp56–77)

However, it is evident that, during the Medvedev period, the agency refrained from choosing between the Munich paradigm and domestically ambivalent modernisation rhetoric. Rather, it focused on building its own base and network of offices in post-Soviet countries and elsewhere—at present it has 97 offices in 80 countries, 73 Russian science and culture centres in 62 countries and 24 diplomatic representatives within embassies in 21 countries. (online at <http://rs.gov.ru>) The agency has sought to define its own identity that distinguishes it from events organised by the Russian World foundation.

In terms of the institutional mechanisms of soft power, the most important decisions of the first period were the establishment of a multi-lingual television channel *Russia Today* in 2005 and the creation of the foundation Russian World in 2007 which promotes Russian culture and language abroad. Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the responsibility for soft power matters lay, up to 2008, with the Russian Centre for International Cultural and Scientific Cooperation.

The Third Period

The third period in the development of Russia's soft power politics that continues to date began in autumn 2011 when the country's political future up to 2024 became certain. The political turbulence that accompanied the 2011–12

return of Vladimir Putin to the Russian presidency influenced, among other things, the basic conditions of the country's soft power politics. Authorities saw the rise of pro-opposition activity in Moscow as a result of soft power influence from abroad upon the urban middle-class, the strata most susceptible to such influences. It then became apparent that a communications network was of paramount importance. (Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, "Putinism under Siege: An Autopsy of Managed Democracy", *Journal of Democracy*, vol23, no3, 2012, pp33–45) In the aftermath of the presidential elections and following a decline in protests, Putin and his administration paid greater attention to soft power issues, both by confronting the external influences upon Russian society and by developing a relevant counter-strategy. Putin was quite self-critical on the matter.

"Russia's image abroad is not formed by us, because it is often distorted and does not represent the real situation in our country nor our contribution to global civilisation, science, culture and the position of our country in international affairs. Those who are shooting and sending out rocket attacks left and right are praised, while those who warn about the need for a restrained dialogue are somehow guilty. And we are guilty for having failed to explain our position".
(*Soveshchanie Poslov i Postoyannykh Predstavitelei Rossiil Meeting of Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives of Russia*, 9 July 2012, online at <http://www.kremlin.ru>)

Soft power politics then came to be seen not as something antithetical to hard power or something moderating it but as a component of integrated policy carried out in conditions of ever-increasing geopolitical confrontations. Political expert, Fyodor Lukyanov, ("Indispensable Nation", Valdai Discussion Club, *Johnson's Russia List*, 2013#173, 23 September 2013, online at <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru>) summarised this transformation as follows:

"People are now the main object of competition in the battle for minds, not only in the figurative sense of duelling images of soft power, but the literal sense of taking care of people who are creating innovative products, putting them to work and providing opportunities for self-realisation".

The strategy of linking soft power politics to the objectives of geopolitical competition became more pronounced. On one hand, the integration process across the post-Soviet space gained momentum with the establishment in 2010 of the Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, which in 2015 was transformed into Eurasian Economic Union with six participating states. On

the other hand, the reaction to such developments from the US increased, with the establishment of the Eastern Partnership Program with Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and the three South Caucasus states being the best example. Although the essence of the Eastern Partnership boiled down to economic collaboration, humanitarian cooperation also played an important and all participants including Belarus under the leadership of Alexander Lukashenko declared a common set of values. As early as the end of 2013, the competition between Russia and the EU over economic and political influence in the Ukraine triggered revolutionary turmoil in the country, followed by the transfer of the Crimea to Russian control and hostilities throughout the Donbass region.

The Russian recourse to hard power in the Ukraine may be assessed as Moscow's inability to achieve intended outcomes through other means, including soft power projections. However, even though this statement is consistent with formal logic, it is simplistic as it ignores the underlying asymmetry in economic potential, political influence and soft power instruments between Russia and the collective West. (For a detailed analysis of the genesis, significance and consequences of the Ukrainian crisis see Dmitry V Efremenko, "Crossing Red Lines: Russia takes the Lead in Revising the World Order", *Russia in Global Affairs*, vol11, no3, July–September 2014, online at <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru>) As a result of the Ukrainian crisis, tensions increased between Russia and the West, leading to a series of sanctions and counter-sanctions, fostering a swift transformation of Russia's soft power politics. The Ukrainian crisis produced a situation whereby the notion of the "Russian world" was no longer recognised outside Russia, as one of the aspects of the country's soft power aimed at establishing humanitarian contact with compatriots living abroad. The new perception of the "Russian world" rhetoric became as is given next.

Although the concept of the "Russian World" remained in mass imagination,

The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo), under the jurisdiction of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. focused on building its own base and network of offices in post-Soviet countries and elsewhere—at present it has 97 offices in 80 countries, 73 Russian science and culture centres in 62 countries and 24 diplomatic representatives within embassies in 21 countries.

at the same time, it became disconnected from the concept of diaspora and “compatriots abroad” in many meaningful ways. This rhetoric frames the vision of the “Russian world” as a distinctive civilisation, situated in a distinctive territory, ruled by a single political subject and struggling with other civilisations for resources and influences. Its meaning became associated with the idea of “recollecting the Russian lands”, which is far from, perhaps even opposite to its initial meaning as the “network community of de-territorialised Russian speakers”. (Mikhail Suslov, “‘Russian World’: Russia’s Policy towards its Diaspora”, *Russie.NEI.Visions*, no103, Institut Français des Relations Internationales, Paris, July 2017, p27, online at <https://www.ifri.org>) However, this semantic recoding of a key concept of Russia’s soft power paradigm did not result in the termination of the activities of the Russian World Foundation (or its rebranding). Its responsibilities did not change. Furthermore, irredentism, contrary to the above-given opinion of Suslov, (*ibid*) did not become an ideological constant, as this could pose serious risks, both external and internal, for the political regime. The proclamation by Russian authorities of an absolute value of sovereignty and their advocacy of multi-polarity in world politics have resulted in a steady positioning of Russia as a stand-alone Eurasian civilisation, crucially different from Western civilisation. The resort to such rhetoric in official public discourse has become more frequent but not systematic.

What predominantly influences official policy is the orientation towards the specificities of targeted audiences. However, the external audience, the main object of soft power projections, is prepared to share the rhetoric of Russia’s “uniqueness” only to a limited extent. Therefore, the official discourse of recent years aimed at them has focussed on inclusivity, a tendency to build bridges to groups thought of as potential allies. In this setting, attention has been paid to the dynamics of internal schisms on the rise in Western societies. In this context, Russia is depicted not as a distinct civilisation but as an incarnation of a powerful and unique cultural tradition, a part of European civilisation, standing for basic values against various postmodern deviations.

Overall, however, the evolution of Russian instruments of soft power in conditions of increasing geopolitical confrontation has led to clear and marked linkages to the manifestation and symbolism of hard power. This paper therefore suggests a notion of “semi-soft power” for analysing this transformation and its possible consequences. It later addresses three cases that demonstrate the unique features of Russian semi-soft power. The first is large-scale information dissemination for political influence by the state. The second case represents a

private commercial project, aimed at a non-political audience, a project that has unexpectedly strengthened the country's semi-soft power. Third and last, is a grassroots initiative, which however owing to its political and symbolic significance, was eventually brought under state control.

RUSSIA TODAY / RT

In July 2001, the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin set the diplomatic corps the task of intensifying activities aimed at building a positive image of Russia abroad. Earlier, in February 2001, the Minister of Press, Broadcasting and Mass Communications Mikhail Lesin (1999–2004) had announced that the government intended to allocate a grant for a social campaign, with the aim of correcting the country's "wrong image" promulgated by foreign media. "We must promote ourselves ... or else we will forever look like bears. How long are we to deceive Americans as to the state of affairs in Russia? We ought to tell the truth". (Ekaterina Majboroda, "Obrazovanie – Nichto, Imidzh – Vse/Education is Nothing, Image is Everything, *Rosbalt*, 28 February 2001, online at <https://www.rosbalt.ru>) After Lesin assumed the post of adviser to the president (2004–09), the original idea about grants evolved into a large-scale project, with the participation of the president's press secretary, Alexey Gromov (2000–12). The final outcome was the creation of the round-the-clock English language television channel *Russia Today*, which started broadcasting in 2005. The nucleus of the *Russia Today* team was formed from journalists of the television channel *Rossiya* and *Novosti* News Information Agency. The post of the *RT* television editor-in-chief was given to 25-year old Margarita Simonyan, who despite her relatively young age, had risen from an ordinary war correspondent of a provincial television channel covering hostilities

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in Chechnya, to a journalist of the “Kremlin pool”, representing *Rossiya*.

Broadcasting in English in 100 countries the television channel was positioned as a “Russian CNN”. In this context, it is worth stressing that whilst the national television channel *Russia 1*, with coverage in Russia, the Commonwealth of Independent States, Western Europe, the Middle East and the US continues to promote the idea of Russia as a great and unique power, *Russia Today* focuses its commitment to the freedom of expression and the freedom of seeking, receiving, transmitting, producing and disseminating information by any legal means. Beginning with broadcasting in English, *Russia Today* was launched in Arabic in 2007, in Spanish in 2009 and in 2014 in Russian. In 2015 it began broadcasting in German and French and concurrently the Anglophone content was subjected to localisation for Great Britain and the US.

After the five-day war with Georgia in August 2008, the channel’s broadcasting policy underwent a strategic change. In 2009, *Russia Today* was rebranded as *RT* to make its logo “universal” and to attract more viewers by downplaying the reference to Russia in its title. As Simonyan remarked, “who is interested in watching news from Russia all day long”? (Galina Miazhevich, “Nation Branding in the Post-Broadcast Era: The Case of *RT*”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol21, no5, 2018, p3) Western audiences were invited to discuss issues affecting them but not necessarily the Russian political establishment and this was done predominantly by Western speakers and journalists. The tone and content of such presentations go against mainstream Western political information. Hosts and presenters of *RT* shows now include well-known politicians, such as the former Scottish Prime Minister Alex Salmond and the former President of Ecuador Rafael Correa. The latter had granted asylum to Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks who released documents unmasking secret US political and military practices. In 2012, Julian Assange, despite his forced confinement in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, hosted an *RT* show “The World Tomorrow”, having as his guest the leader of the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah.

The Russian channel is among the leaders in international news television channels of non-Anglo-Saxon countries. It is ahead of *Al Jazeera*, *Deutsche Welle*, *Euronews* and other channels in terms of the size of the audience viewing the news on personal computers. *RT* was the first amongst Russian television channels to collaborate with YouTube. It was also the first international channel that received over 10 billion hits in viewing. *RT* has been expanding its presence on social networks and blogs, *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Although it often borrows internet

content from *Reuters* or the *Associated Press*, the use of new media is credited to the channel's leadership that promptly assessed their potential as instruments for promoting the country's image. In a way, the "new media" enable one to customise the international image.

As people are initially more inclined to have greater confidence in information sources with which they can make contact, the effect of interactivity leads to the involvement of the audiences in the events under discussion and makes them trust the received information. The internet produces a unique spiral of selective attention, whereby users opt for sources that support their beliefs while ignoring arguments that contradict their views. Nonetheless, the active internationalisation of *RT* has received attention from not only viewers and competitors in the field of political broadcasting but also from supervisory bodies of Western countries. In October 2016, the National Westminster Bank in London ruled that *RT*'s bank accounts were to be closed and the provision of any service to it be discontinued. The judicial proceedings lasted for about half a year before being annulled in January of 2017. (Jasper Jackson, "NatWest Reverses Decision to Close *RT*'s Bank Accounts in UK", *The Guardian*, 30 January 2017, online at <https://www.theguardian.com>)

However, in November of 2016 *RT*'s opponents moved from economic measures to institutional ones, when the European parliament adopted the resolution titled "EU Strategic Communication to Counteract Propaganda by Third Parties", claiming that Russia was carrying out a hostile campaign against the EU. The resolution recognised that in the campaign "the Russian government has been employing a wide range of tools and instruments, such as think-tanks and special foundations (Russkiy Mir), special authorities (Rossotrudnichestvo), multilingual television stations (*RT*), pseudo news agencies and multimedia services (such as Sputnik)". The document was authored by a Polish member of the European parliament and vice-president of the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformers, Anna Fotyga. In addition to Russia's "hostile propaganda", it also touched upon a "hostile propaganda" of the terrorist organisation the Islamic State (prohibited in Russia), but the former was even given more attention than

the latter. (*European Parliament Resolution of 23 November 2016 on EU Strategic Communication to Counteract Propaganda against it by Third Parties*, (2016/2030(INI)), online at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu>)

Placing Russia and the Islamic State on the same footing was described as “irresponsible” by a member of the European parliament, the representative of the European United Left/the Left Greens of the North, Javier Couso (Spain). Although indignant over the EU’s “double standards”, the Left and Ultra-Right parliamentarians standing with Couso were not able to counter the Centrists. (Rossii Zazhimayut *RT* Evroparlament Prinyal Mery Protiv Informacionnogo Vliyaniya Moskvyy/Russia’s *RT* is being stopped: The European Parliament takes Measures against the Information Influence of Moscow, *Kommersant*, no218, 24 November 2016, p5, online at <https://www.kommersant.ru>) While the resolution was not adopted by a qualified majority (many voted against or abstained) and remains recommendatory in nature, it may in the future legitimate censorship in various EU countries. Against the systematic efforts by a number of Western countries to create negative background noise around Russia, the Kremlin responded in 2016 with a new Doctrine of Information Security. Apart from reaffirming the readiness to counter all encroachments on the political stability of the country, the document also contains a commitment to protect Russian journalists “subjected to overt discrimination abroad ... (and) facing impediments in their professional activities”. (*Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation, Approved by Decree of the President of the Russian Federation*, no646, 5 December 2016, online at <https://www.mid.ru>)

In autumn 2016, the US Department of Justice demanded that *RT* be registered as a foreign agent, this being a rare occurrence in relation to the press. With very few rare exceptions, foreign media in the US, including state-funded outlets, operate without such registration. The Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, passed as a response to Nazi propaganda, was extracted from the depths of history with the sole purpose of triggering a scandal over the so-called Kremlin meddling in the presidential elections of 2016. The Democrats, angered by Trump’s victory, chose to believe that the Russian leadership through *RT* had interfered in the presidential campaign. Under pressure from American authorities, *RT* had to meet the demands. However in November 2017, as a retaliatory measure, the Russian parliament passed the Foreign Agents law, in relation to the mass media.

Gradually losing its role as an instrument of soft power in the hands of the state that finances it, *RT* has increasingly become an instrument of confrontation in the information field. Facing the dominance of pro-Western discourse, *RT* has consecutively employed two of the four “strategies of social creativity” to restore the positive image of the Russian state on the whole and the image of the television channel in particular. (Henri Tajfel and John Turner, “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup

Behaviour” in Stephen Worchel and William Austin (Eds), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986, pp7–24) In the search for “new grounds for comparison” is the recourse to a strategy that puts forward alternatives to Western mainstream media, both in selection and presentation of material.

“Yes, Russia may not be perfect, but we have preserved this very freedom of expression for which the West had struggled for so long and which it has lost under the pressure of liberalism and the despotism of tolerance”—this is how the *RT*’s key message might sound today.

In the opinion of Cardiff University’s Miazhevich, (*ibid*, p4) the counter hegemonic struggle presupposes “the absence of objectivity and sanction in the eclectic and opportunistic approach. It also enables *RT* to refute criticism of its output, since it may be framed within the suppression of ‘free speech’ argument”. It was not accidental that the phrase “question more” became a slogan of the first *RT* promotional campaign in Great Britain

in 2010, which was the juxtaposition of various images, easily recognisable by the people. For example, one of the posters placed in newspapers and on billboards along the country’s major highways presented the portraits of the presidents of the US and Iran (Barack Obama and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) with the text asking, “who is the greater nuclear threat”? As the negative tide from the West’s power quarters against *RT* intensified, the channel came to apply another strategy, “as a discriminated against minority accepts the identity imposed upon it”. The strength of this method lies in the fact that it opens up an opportunity to employ irony and humour as specific instruments in countering opponents. Thus in 2015, on its tenth anniversary *RT* put up a video in which an aged Barack Obama, already a pensioner, receives a visit from former Secretary of State John Kerry. In the background the television is broadcasting an address of the sitting US President, Edward Snowden. “Damn propaganda bullhorn”, exclaims Kerry. “Damn propaganda bullhorn”, wearily echoes the aged president and goes to fetch beer from the fridge.

Whilst the national television channel Russia 1, continues to promote the idea of Russia as a great and unique power, Russia Today focuses its commitment to the freedom of expression and the freedom of seeking, receiving, transmitting, producing and disseminating information by any legal means.

In 2017, in subway stations and alongside major American and British highways, *RT* posters and billboards appeared in traditional *RT* colours of green and black, which warned, “Stay alert! Here are placed ads of the trumpet of propaganda”, “the CIA is calling us ‘the propaganda machine’. Learn how we call the CIA”. Accusations against *RT* over “Russian meddling in the American elections of 2016” were voiced by Western politicians and mass media throughout 2017. Having mastered the style of hyperbole and the subsequent “reduction ad absurdum”, public relations specialists of the channel were quick to capitalise on the “interference” theme. “Got stuck in traffic? Lost elections? Pin the blame on us!” In no time, the hashtag #russiadidit spread across the internet like wildfire. People took pleasure in placing ironic posts like “the Russians are found guilty for the mess that your dog has made in your house; for your speeding ticket; for bad weather; for your unhappy personal life; for the tectonic fault lines, as well as for the sinking of the Titanic and the leaning of the Pisa Tower”. Fun was made of, among other things, the central theme of those months—“Russian hackers”. The ads appealed, “Watch *RT* to learn who’ll become a victim of our next hacker attack”.

The same ironic strategy is employed in the product line of souvenirs that can be bought on *RT*’s website. For \$15, one can purchase a T-shirt with the words “Alien Agent” on it and for three dollars, a sticker for the car with the depiction of a bear wearing a traditional Russian winter hat and clasping a leather shoe in his paw (an unambiguous allusion to Nikita Khrushchev and his specific style of polemics at the fifteenth session of the United Nations General Assembly. The bear declares, “I will show you what soft power is”. (*RT Shop*, online at <https://shop-rt.com>). It should be pointed out that the aggressive reaction of the West against *RT* as well as accusations that the channel is nothing more than “Putin’s propaganda machine” attest to the fact, though in a negative sense, that *RT* is quite effective in its work. Its role in promoting a positive image of Russia is not substantial and is limited to professionally made documentaries on non-political topics. Nevertheless, with its modest resources, the channel has been visibly contributing to the erosion of trust in mainstream Western politics. It is now evident that every new restrictive action against *RT* in the EU, Great Britain or US is perceived by the Russian leadership as a measure of *RT*’s effectiveness, resulting in a stable growth in budgetary support for the television channel and the whole media-holding of *Russia Today*.

MASHA AND THE BEAR

Russia has a rich, century-old tradition of making children's cartoons and in the period after World War Two animation reached its highest level. However, only in recent years has the industry seen a global breakthrough with successful projects such as the sitcom *Masha and the Bear*, produced in 3-D animation by Animaccord Animation Studio. The triumph of the two characters—a restless girl Masha and a huge good-natured Bear, who helps her get out of various complicated situations—has been worldwide. As of June 2020, one of the episodes had more than 4.3 billion views, making it the site's fifth most viewed video of all time and the most viewed video on *YouTube* that is not a music video. Aside from *YouTube*, it can be watched on the multi-media platform *Netflix* and a number of other video platforms. Apart from Russia, the show has been running on popular television channels in Great Britain and countries of the EU, Latin America and the Middle East. In Indonesia, it has become so popular that many new born girls have been named Masha, quite uncharacteristic for a Muslim society. This is partially explained by the fact that Masha's clothes have some resemblance to traditional costumes worn by Indonesian girls.

The international success of the cartoon eventually drew the attention of political experts. First, it was interpreted as yet another instrument of "Putin's Russia's soft power", (Giulia Pompili, "Il Più Grande Successo di soft power di Vladimir Putin? Masha e Orso", *Il Foglio*, 11 December 2016) despite the fact that only in the second half of the 2010s did the funds for the project, quite modest in comparison to returns, begin coming from the state budget. It is evident that the sitcom reinterprets the image of the bear, which traditionally for many in the West is the symbol of Russia. In Victorian times, the cartoonist of the legendary *Punch* magazine had depicted "the Russian bear" as a malicious creature, always ready to commit aggression, although the first visual juxtaposition between Russia and the bear

In November of 2016 RT's opponents moved from economic measures to institutional ones, when the European parliament adopted the resolution titled "EU Strategic Communication to Counteract Propaganda by Third Parties", claiming that Russia was carrying out a hostile campaign against the EU.

dates back to sixteenth century Dutch maps. A positive “rebranding” of the Russian bear undertaken during the Moscow Olympics of 1980 as a symbol of cordiality and hospitality disappeared long ago, despite the windows of opportunities that opened in the years of Mikhail Gorbachev’s *perestroika*. Masha’s bear seems more capable of bringing about positive change. However, this fact has led some analysts to assert in all seriousness that the positive image of Russia among non-politicised audiences is fraught with considerable political threats. In the view of a professor of Priit Hõbemyagi of Tallinn University, “a bear symbolises Russia, it is a fact ... the cartoon was created for the sole purpose to convey to the world a message, where the cruel image of Russia (the Bear) is replaced by a soft and kind one”. (Pitamber Kaushik, “How a Popular Children’s Cartoonshow set in Siberia Illustrates the Diversity of Perspective”, *Helsinki Times*, 2 April 2020, online at <https://www.helsinkitimes.fi>) According to an intelligence expert and professor at the University of Buckingham Anthony Glees, “Masha is feisty, even rather nasty, but also plucky. She punches above her slight weight. It is not far-fetched to see her as Putinesque”. (Mark Bridge, “Children’s Show is Propaganda for Putin, say Critics”, *The Times*, 17 November 2018, online at <https://www.thetimes.co.uk>) In the meantime, the images of Masha and the Bear are being increasingly employed in political agitations, as illustrated by the campaign of the Serbian–Russian movement in 2016.

Disregarding the negative anti-Russian attitudes in the West, The Masha and the Bear cartoon, objectively speaking inspires positive associations with Russia among children worldwide. Nothing suggests that the project was conceived originally as an instrument of soft power, with Russian authorities standing behind the scenes. The cartoon’s success would have never been so spectacular had its creators from the very start catered to the interests of Russian authorities and purposefully targeted certain strata of external audiences. As Joseph S Nye (“What China and Russia don’t get about Soft Power”, *Foreign Policy*, 29 April 2013, online at <https://foreignpolicy.com>) has pointed out, “the best propaganda is not propaganda”. Over time as the popularity of the cartoon has grown in foreign markets, both the creators and the authorities realised its role in Russia’s politics of soft power. Thereafter, the creators cleverly developed some scenes and symbols, which may be regarded as being related to the manifestations of Russian or even Soviet hard power. After all it is worth remembering that nowadays a key role is played not by the competition of ideas, but by the competition of attractive symbols and images.

IMMORTAL REGIMENT

The Immortal Regiment event takes place in Russia and other countries on 9 May, Victory day. There is a huge procession when people carry photos or plates with the names of relatives who were war veterans, partisans, resistance fighters, workers on the home front, prisoners of concentration camps, victims of the Leningrad siege or children of war. Family stories are placed in a special People's Chronicle on the movement's website. The leitmotif of the event is to connect Victory day with the images of people who lived through the war and suffered so that future generations could live. A grassroots initiative that emerged at the beginning of 2010s it has enriched the repertoire of Russia's commemorative practices. Realising the powerful symbolic and mobilisation potential of the initiative, the authorities quickly brought it under their control and integrated it into the scenarii of official celebrations. The Immortal Regiment commemoration was included in the federal programme of celebrations dedicated to the seventieth anniversary of the country's victory in World War

With very few exceptions, foreign media in the US, including state-funded outlets, operate without such registration. The Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, passed as a response to Nazi propaganda, was extracted from the depths of history with the sole purpose of triggering a scandal over the so-called Kremlin meddling in the presidential elections of 2016.

Two and ever since many have come to view it as a state-sponsored project. On 9 May 2015, the procession along Tverskaya street and on to Red Square, in which tens of thousands of people took part, was headed by the President of Russia Vladimir V Putin carrying a portrait of his father who fought in the war. ("Akcija 'Bessmertnyj Polk'/Action 'Immortal Regiment'", *RIA Novosti*, 9 May 2019, online at <https://ria.ru>)

It is important to note that the Immortal Regiment has not only a domestic but also an international dimension. It may be regarded as one of the most effective mechanisms of Russian soft power politics, if it is seen not as an instrument for winning over opponents but as a struggle for winning the minds and hearts of those who are wavering, an attempt to gain their sympathy and allegiance. The Immortal Regiment is yet another way to cement a narrative in which Russia is perceived as a great power, irrespective of its present achievements or mishaps.

In 2019, the Immortal Regiment event took place in more than 500 cities in 115 countries, including Argentina, France, Israel, Serbia, the Ukraine, the US and others. In New York two thousand people took part in the procession, in Berlin more than three thousand and in Toronto five thousand. Columns of the regiments marched through five cities in Argentina, eleven in France and over fifty in Bulgaria, In Serbia ten thousand plus took part in the event, in Riga twenty thousand and in Moldova sixty thousand. The participants included not only Russian nationals but also people from other post-Soviet republics, including the Ukraine. Occasionally, the “export version” of the Immortal Regiment has pushed forward new ideas and meanings, different from the original purpose of the event. Thus in Berlin in 2015 the Immortal Regiment procession merged (without prompting by Russian authorities) with anti-NATO demonstrations; this spontaneous scene took place around the Soviet War Memorial in the Tiergarten. In 2019 in Syria, participants carried photos not only of the World War Two veterans but also of the Syrian conflict victims. As was noted by the chairwoman of the Dar (Gift) organisation in Latakia, Tat’yana Allayua, responsible for the co-ordination of the movement in this province, “The event is steadily gaining in popularity. In essence, it brings together two holidays—the Syrian Day of the Fallen (May 6) and our Victory Day. This perception was shared by the people who had come to participate in the meeting”. A female student from the Tishreen University, Diana Ragheb, who had taken part for the second time said, “It’s a memory about relatives, about my grandfathers who fought in the Great Patriotic War. At the same very time, this is the memory of the Syrians who were killed in the Civil War”. (“Bolee 150 Chelovek prinyali uchastie v Akcii ‘Bessmertnyj Polk’ v Latakii/More than 150 People take part in the Action ‘Immortal Regiment’ in Latakia”, *RIA Novosti*, 9 May 2019, online at <https://ria.ru>)

Experts in memory studies have observed that the narrative patterns related to a nation’s past have a strong impact on the way people interpret present events. Political elites employing such national historical patterns may be promoting popular efforts explaining and justifying their own policies in the eyes of domestic and foreign audiences. In this particular instance, the association between Russian collective memory and the Syrian campaign raises the latter, as it were to a higher level, by ascribing to the Syrian narrative an additional historical depth and wider meaning. However, it should be noted that such modalities work best only for domestic audiences in Russia and Syria.

CONCLUSION

This paper asserts that the present stage of Russia's soft power policy has certain unique features, which make it possible to reconsider metaphorically the term itself. The idea behind its notion of "Russia's semi-soft power" is that in analysing current international relations, one should take into account the fact that Russia's interactions with the outside world in the fields of culture, education, science, sports, etc have been increasingly susceptible to sharp confrontation with the collective West. The causes stem not from ideological doctrines, as they used to in Soviet times but from geopolitical interests. This has been facilitated by the instrumentalisation of the term "soft power" in official documents and political practices of the Russian state. In addition, mainstream Western politics has been emphasising the elements of hard power in Kremlin's politics, seeing them as subversive with regard to the values and interests of their own countries. More important is the artificiality of attempts to contrast hard and soft power. Soft power is not an antithesis to hard power; it is not a way to compensate its flagrant manifestations but rather a component of the international image of a country, whose foreign policy seeks to influence other international actors. In this respect, Russia today is not exceptional; rather the Russian case provides an opportunity to see the general trend.

With its modest resources, the channel has been visibly contributing to the erosion of trust in mainstream Western politics. It is now evident that every new restrictive action against RT in the EU, Great Britain or US is perceived by the Russian leadership as a measure of RT's effectiveness, resulting in a stable growth in budgetary support for the television channel

According to Robert O Keohane and Joseph S Nye, ("Power and Interdependence in the Information Age", *Foreign Affairs*, vol77, no5, 1998, p86) soft power may be considered a resource by which an actor influences "others". However, this resource cannot be isolated from other resources and its effectiveness is defined by such factors as who and on whom the influence is exerted. In the same fashion, contraposing soft and hard power would always be relative in terms of goal setting. Rather, one should speak of a wide array of instruments, resources and ways of achieving foreign policy aims, wherein between the extreme points, that is, between soft and hard power,

there lie regular interstate interactions and a vast intermediate or grey zone, inside which the actions of international entities are, as a rule, not transparent. This grey zone could include hybrid operations in cyberspace, propaganda campaigns and the dissemination of fake news as well as politico-economic coercion, proxy wars, etc. Zones like these are either not governed by international law or else are governed insufficiently. In consequence, state entities acting in grey zones in their own right or, in the majority of cases, through intermediaries could achieve desired outcomes at little risk. (Kathleen H Hicks, Alice H Friend, Joseph Federici, Hijab Shah, Megan Donahoe, Matthew Conklin, Asya Akca, Michael Matlaga and Lindsay Sheppard, *By Other Means, Part I: Campaigning in the Grey Zone*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, International Security Program Report, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, July 2019) All this may be thought of as another unique feature of soft power.

The current version of Russia's semi-soft power has a visible trend—a readiness to accentuate the value differences with the West. The ostentatious scepticism with regard to the values of postmodern mainstream means a rejection of any desire, on the side of Russia, to be included into this matrix of ideas, symbols and values. Rather, it is the reverse—as was proclaimed by Putin in his presidential address of 2013 the country's commitment to traditional values, defined in broadly ethnic-nationalist and heteronormative terms. (Ben Sohl, *Russia's Soft Power Strategy to Co-Opt the West*, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, 23 October 2019, online at <https://sites.tufts.edu>) Putin showed his solidarity with Western people and groups that discern harmful trends in postmodern values and developments in the spirit of political correctness. In reaction to this part of Putin's presidential addresses American paleoconservative author Pat Buchanan, (“Is Putin One of Us”, *Townhall*, 17 December 2013, online at <https://townhall.com>) posed a rhetorical question “is Putin one of us” giving ground to suppose that, at least in some cases, this philosophy could be quite plausible. Apparently, it is exactly from the standpoint of such rhetoric about values and national interests that Putin perceived Donald Trump as “one of us”, whereas neither Barack Obama, nor Hilary Clinton, nor Joe Biden qualified as such. However, the confrontation with the West over the values issues has not thus far acquired, on the Russian side, an importance of strategic magnitude. On the contrary, the Kremlin still demonstrates a high level of tactical flexibility, making it possible for Russian authorities, depending upon circumstances and issues under question, to emphasise the commonality of interests with the West rather than differences.

There is no denying that Russian semi-soft power presently constitutes a unique phenomenon, combining both attractive and for some, repelling

features. As for the latter, they are, as a rule, grossly hyperbolised by Western governments, the bulk of media and a number of influential nongovernmental organisations that together carry out an increasingly coordinated strategy aimed at the demonisation of the Putin regime and the undermining of Russia's geopolitical positions in the post-Soviet space and Eurasia as a whole. Figuratively all this looks like a bizarre amalgam between a vial of Novichok, with the Bear and Masha inside, the ever victorious wrestler Khabib Nurmagomedov and Valeriy Gergiev's orchestra performing, among the ruins of Palmira liberated from Islamic State terrorists, a quadrille by Rodion Shchedrin. Such semi-soft power would certainly attract the attention of the target groups and at times, might even be conducive to Russian foreign policy interests. 

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