

GEOPOLITICS AND REGIONAL SECURITY

THE “RUSSIAN IDEA” VS. THE “AMERICAN DREAM”: “SOFT ARM WRESTLING” IN THE CIS

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ABSTRACT

The author analyzes different aspects of the “soft power” phenomenon—ideological, humanitarian and cultural—that the main geopolitical players use in post-Soviet Central Asia. He compares the “soft power” policy of the United States and the Russian Federation and their key parameters: its ideologies and values; the tools and institutions through which this policy is implemented; and the target social and other groups that, under the impact of “soft power,” become its convinced supporters and promote it in their countries.

The author reveals several specific features and distinctions between the Russian and American soft power strategies, many of them, rooted in different ideologies

and values, being of a fundamental nature. The tools, target groups, and social bases are likewise different. Today, Russia’s soft power predominates in the post-Soviet space and in Central Asia as its part, yet it remains to be seen for how long.

The author points to several factors that restrain and will continue to restrain the impact of Russian and American “soft power” in the region. In the foreseeable future, the Western/American ideological impact will remain limited, while the current domination of Russia’s soft power looks shaky: it relies on social groups and institutions that have already exhausted their potential. This gives other external players a chance, ISIS and its “soft power novelties” in particular.

KEYWORDS: *“soft power,” U.S. foreign policy, foreign policy of the Russian Federation, post-Soviet Central Asia, ISIS.*

Introduction

So far, the rivalry between the great powers for world domination has been described as a “tug-of-war” between teams of professional politicians, diplomats, economists, and financiers. Today, so-called soft power has moved to the fore in the battlefield to push confrontation into the spheres of ideology and culture. In other words, this is a battle for the minds and hearts of the people and the ruling elite or, to put it differently, a competition of ideas and basic values. Victory in this “non-material” ideological clash will ensure long-term domination in the region or even throughout the world. In fact, this route is much shorter than direct military interference or economic pressure. Here I have compared the specific features and prospects of the mounting confrontation of the soft powers of Russia and the United States unfolding across the post-Soviet space. Today, the ideological and philosophical postulates of these geopolitical centers have moved so far apart that the future of the post-Soviet region and Russia as its part depends on the answer to the question: Whose soft power is harder?

Soft Power Defined

In 2002, Joseph Nye Jr. described soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment.”¹ He was talking about persuasion as a geopolitical tool and an image that attracts allies and raises the country’s international prestige. This attractive image, otherwise called “soft power,” includes the following factors: high and comfortable living standards; education; moral authority; attractive ideology and values; a rich history and culture; and prominent sportsmen, scientists, and writers. They arouse the respect of other nations, and stir up interest and the desire to embrace the same principles and values at home.

There is an opinion that “soft power” should be combined with “hard power” (which implies military might) to coerce opponents and force potential allies, satellites, or even rivals, driven by fear or pressure, to join. It should be said that any country willing to defend its interests, territory, and independence has to keep its “hard power” at a certain level. On the other hand, the considerable international weight and influence of a number of states are unrelated to their far-from-large armies. Abuse of hard power produces far-from-expected results and, in fact, decreases the country’s soft power and taints its image. In the last ten to twelve years, starting with the Iraq War, U.S. soft power has been repeatedly dented. In 2003, the attractiveness of the United States among the loyal European population dropped by one-third or even more.² The same is happening to Russia’s soft power today in the wake of the Ukrainian developments (at least, outside the CIS countries). The Global Peace Index 2014 ranked Russia 152nd among 162 countries, that is, one of the eleven most danger-

¹ J. Nye, *Soft Power, the Means of Success in World Politics*, Public Affairs, New York, 2009, p. x.

² *Ibidem*.

ous and potentially aggressive, as perceived by public opinion, states in the world.³ Even if this is not true, the low rating speaks of a serious ideological defeat, plummeting international prestige, or potential geopolitical collapse. It comes as no surprise that Teddy Roosevelt noted, “when you have a big stick, it is wise to speak softly.”⁴ Soft power is gaining weight in the contemporary world, while its definition and measuring instruments have become a target of study at the national and international level.

Here I intend to measure soft power using three main criteria:

- First, By means of *ideology and values*. Clear and logical ideologies and values (moral, legal, religious, etc.) hold a lot of attraction; their messages are stronger and their perception inside and outside the country is highly positive.
- Second, *the tools or institutions of soft power* are of huge importance. I have in mind all kinds of organizations and structures ranging from state bodies and universities to NGOs and the media used to popularize soft power inside the country and outside it. The results depend on the capacities of these institutions and their tuning.
- Third, *the social basis and target groups* of soft power are no less important. The social basis consists of social groups (intelligentsia, migrants, and ethnic groups) prepared to succumb to soft power and become its vehicles and defenders in other places. Target groups might be found outside the social base and yet might become another factor of soft power influence.

Soft Power of the Russian Federation

Today, most Russian and foreign experts agree that Russia’s soft power remains undeveloped and that the RF is trailing behind its main geopolitical rivals. Speaking at a meeting of Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives, President Putin said in particular: “Russia’s image abroad is not formed by us and, as a result, it is often distorted and does not reflect the real situation in our country, or Russia’s contribution to global civilization, science, and culture. Our country’s policies often suffer from a biased portrayal these days ... our fault lies in our failure to adequately explain our position.”⁵ The Institute for Government (U.K.) and the *Monocle* monthly in their “The New Persuaders: An International Rating of Soft Power” did not rank Russia among the first 25 countries.⁶

This can be explained by the persisting post-Soviet ideological vacuum; there is no logical and consistent ideological system or a universal national idea to serve as the foundation of soft power applied inside and outside the country. Russia’s soft power today is a vague combination of so far ill-adjusted ideological bits and pieces. Its leaders have no choice but to adjust concepts and ideological formulas to specific situations, regions, or audiences. Opposition politician Vladimir Ryzhkov from Russia has offered the following description: “The Kremlin takes one scalpel to use in Crimea: it is labeled ‘the Russian World.’ Then it takes out a different scalpel in Astana, and it is labeled ‘the Eurasian Union.’ It takes out a third scalpel in Beijing and use the BRICS concept, by which it means, ‘anything that is not the West.’ It is honing it for use against the West. These ideological concepts are

³ See: A. Naumov, “‘Miagkaia sila’ i vneshnepoliticheskiy imidzh Rossiiskoy Federatsii,” *Geopolitika.ru*, available at [<http://www.geopolitica.ru/en/node/6914#.VWYOqGpFAqM>], 3 April, 2015.

⁴ J. Nye, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁵ [<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/15902>].

⁶ [http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/The%20new%20persuaders_0.pdf].

simply incompatible. Each operating theatre has its own set of instruments.”⁷ The critics of Russia and the Kremlin believe that the impact of Russia’s soft power abroad leaves much to be desired precisely because the country has not yet acquired a universal ideological basis.

Today, there are three main ideological blocs, for which Russian political technologists are trying to find a more or less integral and universal construct:

- First, *the Russian World* concept, which still needs its last touches. In the past, it was used to describe the unity of the Russian-speaking, Slavic, and Orthodox community. Today, it has become a global civilizational phenomenon covering the 300 million people who speak Russian, are interested in the Russian culture, and live in Russia and the Near and Far Abroad.⁸ According to President Putin, “the Russian World can and should encompass all who cherish Russian literature and Russian culture, no matter whether they live in Russia or outside it.”⁹ Putin, in line with the ideas of his favorite philosopher Ivan Ilyin, spoke of the Russian idea as “the great mission of Russians to unite and bind civilization.”¹⁰
- The doctrine of *Eurasianism*, or rather *neo-Eurasianism*, is the second component that puts Western Europe and Russia on opposite sides. Its supporters invented a new concept—*median Eurasia*—to describe practically the entire territory of the former Soviet Union. They argue that it was a very distinctive civilization, with Russia as its core: “‘Russia-Eurasia’ not only shares the historical destinies of its peoples and kindred cultures, but has a common economic-political future,” which might perish if subjected to Western-style modernization.¹¹ These people believe that the CIS countries cannot achieve true independence and that, therefore, the choice is not between independence and Russia’s hegemony, but between taking commands either from Russia or its rivals. The Russian world and Eurasia are bound together by obvious anti-Western feelings and their close attention to geopolitics and the conspiracy theory (Eurasia-Russia stands opposed to the worldwide conspiracy of the United States and the West), as well as idealization of the Soviet past—the Soviet Union as an Eurasian power and certain elements of neo-Stalinism. The ideologists of Eurasianism regard the state as a tool of coercion that is indispensable in Eurasia where liberalism, democracy, and weak power have been rejected by the majority as alien.
- *The system of values* is the third component based on traditionalism as opposed, to an increasing degree, to Western values. Western democracy is associated with double standards, social inequality, moral degradation (unisex marriages, the culture of unisex in schools, and sexual minorities) and decline of religion. Russia-Eurasia, on the other hand, is presented as an outpost of traditional religious and family values common to all mankind and public morals. In his latest addresses to the Federal Assembly, Putin described Western values as “so-called tolerance, neutered and barren” and “a kind of Amoral International,” while the destruction of traditional values from above is an undemocratic process being carried out contrary to the will of the majority.¹²

⁷ “Senseless and Merciless: ‘The Russian World’: The Ideology of a Russian Crusade,” available at [<http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Senseless-and-Merciless.pdf>].

⁸ See: E.I. Pivovarov, “Russkiy iazyk i russkiy mir kak faktory sotsiokulturnogo dialoga na postsovetkom prospranstve,” *Likhachevskie chtenia*, 2007, pp. 167-169.

⁹ “Senseless and Merciless...,” p. 8.

¹⁰ “Russia: The National Question,” available at [<http://www.rt.com/politics/putin-immigration-manifest-article-421/>].

¹¹ S.P. Mamontov, *Osnovy kulturologii*, Olimp, Moscow, 1999, available at [<http://www.countries.ru/library/russian/evraz.htm>], 20 September, 2014.

¹² [<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/19825>].

The tools and institutions of Russia's "soft power." So far, the Russian and pro-Russian media, or to be more exact, the unified information, cultural, and linguistic space of the entire territory of the former Soviet Union, have been and remain the most efficient tool of Russia's soft power—one of the main and the most efficient tools inherited from the Soviet Union. So far, Russian TV and radio, the press, and the Russian-language Internet dominate the post-Soviet countries. The greater part of the educated and socially active citizens of the CIS countries has a good command of Russian. Most people, likewise, prefer the Russian media and Internet and trust them. Thus, they have become the vehicles of Russia's soft power outside Russia's borders. The CIS countries' people borrow their ideas about the world from the Russian media. The higher education system, which offers opportunities to tens of thousands of students from all over the world, can be described as another active and effective soft power tool.

There are state, semi-official, and public organizations, such as the Russian World Foundation, that are still tuning up and, for the moment, lag behind their Western partners. The Russian Orthodox Church and the muftiats have a special role to play; in the new conditions, they have become de facto tools used by the state in the struggle for "traditional and religious values."

The numerous "Eurasian" groups and alliances constitute a specifically Russian phenomenon. Abandoned to linger on the political margins, today they have suddenly acquired the status of an influence group. Their leaders came to the forefront of Russia's soft policy; they travel from one post-Soviet country to another and from one university to another giving lectures and contributing to scholarly conferences. It is not surprising that they are the most consistent supporters of the present political course as a visual realization of their most cherished dreams. Alexander Dugin, the main ideologist of Eurasianism, has said that nobody opposes Putin's course any longer, while those who are still doing this should be certified as mentally ill and treated accordingly, and concluded: "Putin is everywhere, Putin is everything, Putin is absolute, Putin is irreplaceable."¹³

Social basis and target groups. The middle-aged and older groups of the population living in the CIS countries form the main social basis of Russia's soft power. They were born in the Soviet Union and have found it hard to adjust to the market economy. Nearly all of them are nostalgic and nearly all of them idealize the Soviet past. They associate democracy with the lawlessness and plundering of the 1990s, unbridled corruption, poverty, and instability; they withdrew their support of the democratic parties and movements in the post-Soviet countries that have found themselves in the backyard of local politics. The democratic project has failed across the post-Soviet region, while people are willing, to a greater extent than before, to embrace the idea of restoring the former empire. So far a considerable number of Russian speakers finds it hard to accept the new, post-Soviet conditions.

The local Communist parties, shreds of the C.P.S.U., are another target group and even the basis of Russia's soft power. Their members are the most consistent and ideologically motivated supporters of integration, a process that Moscow has launched and is supporting. The same can be said about the post-Communist national political elites now in power: they are genetically related to the past, closely connected with the Russian elite, and share much of its ideological principles and methods of governance. Experts talk about an integral post-Soviet political and economic model typical of practically all the CIS countries: governance by command and administration; institutions of power and property that have become a single whole; over-centralization of resources in the hands of a limited elite group; the high level of corruption, economies geared toward the export of raw materials, etc. The national elite would have preferred to preserve this type of power system, but it will not survive under the pressure of democracy. This explains why it accepts the anti-Western rhetoric of the Russian leaders and puts it into practice.

¹³ "Senseless and Merciless..." p. 6.

Soft Power of the United States and the West

Ideologies and values. Unlike Russia, the United States has a historically confirmed and logical ideological system designed to present a positive image to the world and consolidate its influence and international prestige. The soft power of the United States is rooted in the American bourgeois revolution of the late eighteenth century. It adopted the famous Bill of Rights, which, for the first time in human history, obligated all state structures to respect the rights of all citizens. The country responded with rapid economic growth that went on for many centuries and created the positive image of a country of unrestricted entrepreneurship, freedom, and equal opportunities for all. This attracted and still attracts millions of migrants from all corners of the world.

American soft power rests on the idea of the American dream firmly rooted in the minds of the people—a country of equal opportunities for all who are ready to work. This is the philosophy of individualism, which considers the rights and interests of the individual to be of primary importance. The Eurasian system of values treats the interests of the state as the highest priority. This is main difference and contradiction between the East and the West. The principle of a law-governed state is registered in the constitutions of most countries, but only the most developed countries have put this principle into practice.

This means that the United States, and the West as a whole, claims the honor of the main protector of liberal-democratic values—freedom of speech, freedom of entrepreneurship, freedom of conscience, the right to work, etc.—across the world. This can be said about the basic principles of democracy, such as the separation and election of powers, accountability of the government to the public, transparency, limitation of corruption and nepotism, etc. These principles have been recognized by the international community and registered in international documents and agreements. All states are expected to observe these principles, otherwise the international community (in which the West plays the main role) has the right to introduce economic sanctions against the violators and plunge them into international isolation. The universality of American-Western values is one of the main resources and sources of soft power of the United States and the West.

Civil society is a component of the soft power of the West; this concept is applied to the non-governmental sector, that is, the space between the government and the man-in-the-street occupied by various public organizations (political parties, NGOs, and independent media). Civil society is expected to protect the interests of the people in government structures and against the arbitrary rule of the people in power. It is commonly believed that it is impossible to set up a state ruled by law without a strong civil society; it is absolutely indispensable in curbing corruption and creating conditions for higher standards of living. This explains why the United States and the EU assumed the mission of promoting and developing civil society and liberal-democratic values throughout the world.

Tools and institutions. American soft power is rooted in the phenomenon of mass culture (pop-culture) shaped under the pressure of America's mass industry, Hollywood being one of the main tools. Today, seven out of ten films shown in Russia were made in America; the top 100 out of 400 best known films in the world were filmed in the United States.¹⁴ The English language plays the same role: today, about 1.5 billion use English as their native tongue, while over 1 billion study it. The GDP of the United States and Western Europe is about \$40 trillion, which enables the Western countries to sponsor most of the international financial institutions, cultural and sports events, mega projects, etc.

¹⁴ See: A. Khudaykulova, "V chem zakliuchaetsia miagkaia sila SShA?" available at [<http://ushistory.ru/esse/1054-is-soft-power-of-usa-the-same-as-americanization.html>], 14 May, 2015.

This explains why the U.S. and the West largely influence the policy of the main international organizations—from the U.N. and IMF to small international agencies. Most international organizations are also determined to promote liberal-democratic principles and values all over the world. There is a system of assessments of how human rights are observed in different countries, the conditions of doing business, etc. The states and governments with low ratings run the risk of being pushed into the group of “rogue countries” to share it with North Korea.

Social base and target groups. The local and still developing middle class, that is, people with a fairly stable social and financial status, is the main social group in the CIS countries that supports the system of liberal values, is ready to develop it, and is, therefore, receptive to Western soft power. This group consists of medium and small businessmen, shop owners, the intelligentsia, journalists, actors, etc. who have acquired property and gained a certain social status, mainly through work and knowledge. They want to limit the power of the bureaucrats, lower the level of corruption, and create transparent and clear rules for business. They want a stronger civil society to put bureaucracy under effective control; they are setting up NGOs, as well as civil and non-governmental institutions. In short, the stronger the middle class, the stronger civil society, and vice versa. In the countries of developed democracy, where the middle class constitutes up to 70-80% of the total population, civil society is fairly influential. It is much smaller in the CIS countries; however, the middle class and non-governmental sector are the consistent supporters of democratization and the law-governed state. This explains why the post-Soviet autocratic elites are working hard to neutralize the non-governmental sector funded from abroad: they dismiss it as foreign agents and accuse it of stirring up color revolutions. In fact, NGOs are not a threat, most of them are loyal to the government and stay away from politics. Their activities are geared toward developing a strong civil society incompatible with the authoritarian system that rules by commands. The ruling elites across the CIS are well aware of this.

What Next? Conclusions

Today, Russia’s soft power still dominates across the CIS, Ukraine being the only exception. The events unfolding in this country have demonstrated that, when used, hard power invariably defeats soft power. Indeed, when Crimea, the bulwark of Russia’s soft power in Ukraine, was detached from it, the pro-Russian Party of the Regions and the Communist Party of Ukraine (the recent rulers) were defeated and demoralized; the pro-Russian social base shrank from 50 to 15-20%, while anti-Russian feelings have been spreading far and wide across Ukraine.

Russia is still using its soft power elsewhere in the CIS, while anti-West sentiments have been on the rise in recent years. This can be explained by the following:

First, the positive image of the United States throughout the world was dented during the presidential terms of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. The Americans are fully aware of this, Joseph Nye, the author of the “soft power” concept, in particular. The critics of America’s policies write that in the last fifteen years the United States has been relying on the double standards policy and has sacrificed the principles and values of its soft power to its geopolitical interests. Washington has seriously blundered in its foreign policy: it is enough to mention the invasion of Iraq in 2003 under the false pretext of preventing the production of weapons of mass destruction and the very doubtful campaign of regime change in Libya and Syria that left a political vacuum filled by radical fundamentalists. The public is very disappointed by the reports about the ties between the Bush family and the oil lobby in the United States (this information has not been disproved); there is information that Colonel Qaddafi funded Sarkozy’s presidential campaign, that Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS use the latest American armaments, and that in its relations with authoritarian regimes Washington uses double standards.

To a certain extent, most international organizations and donor-countries are not alien to double standards when dealing with civil society, NGOs, and the independent media of the CIS countries. Their funding of the civil factor is shrinking to the accompaniment of statements that civil society and democratic values should be supported and encouraged. In real life, USAID cut back Central Asian project funding from \$436 to 126 million in 2011, while in 2013, this sum dropped to \$118 million (a drop by 12% against the 2012 level).¹⁵ It comes as no surprise that the number of sustainable NGOs is steadily decreasing, while the local governments are sparing no effort to neutralize independent civil society and media. Western donors are pouring more and more money into reforms (mainly simulated by the local elites) of the state sector.

The West has lost the basis of its soft power in the region: civil society is in a permanent crisis, while the local middle class (in its classical interpretation), which needs a law-governed state, is nonexistent.

There is one more factor that curbs the soft power of the West in most of the CIS countries, the Central Asian countries in particular. The contemporary set of Western values is presented in its “extreme liberal” or leftist-radical form, which has raised the right of the individual to express and realize his “Ego” to an absolute magnitude. The Charlie Hebdo phenomenon is one of the outcomes, the liberal radicalism of which invited an equally radical response from the traditional community of the CIS and the Muslim world as a whole. This set of values, however, is offered as an ultimatum, irrespective of local conditions and in disregard of local sentiments. It is hardly surprising that this set is rejected. The local governments and anti-Western propaganda machine have learned to exploit this in their interests by attracting attention to the most repulsive aspects. The man-in-the-street acquires a negative image of the West, closely tied with moral degradation and decline; it is seen as a threat to the local family and moral traditions, religion, etc.

In the long-term perspective, however, the future of Russia’s soft power in the CIS is not that bright, despite the current wave of anti-Western sentiments. Russia is relying on a social basis that has essentially no future: the ruling kleptocracy, political elites and leaders (Yanukovich being the best example) steeped in corruption and simulating reforms, communist parties living on the political margins, and labor migrants who dream of Russian pensions, visa-free regimes, and the abolishment of licenses. These “support groups” belong to the post-Soviet model, which has outlived itself and should be modernized and reformed. The pro-Russian elites now in power either can or cannot start modernization; they either change or fail to change themselves and will disappear from the political scene. In either case, Russia will lose the social basis of its soft power. Today, Russia is largely placing its stakes on nostalgia and disappointment in the democratization of the 1990s. The Soviet Union, where poor regions lived at the expense of rich ones and where there was social albeit illusory equality, cannot be revived. This realization will come as a bitter disappointment, which will deprive Russia’s soft power of its future in the post-Soviet region.

This might create a vacuum that will attract a third force: the Islamic Caliphate will move into the Muslim regions of Central Asia and Russia. It relies on soft power, a combination of medieval fanaticism and political high tech, a new form and new content of soft power, a unique phenomenon that should be studied and opposed by the coordinated and concerted efforts of all the international players—from the United States and the European Union to the CIS countries, including the Russian Federation.

¹⁵ See: V. Odintsov, “NPO SShA in Tsentralnaia Azia,” NEO, 8 January, 2015, available at [<http://ru.journal-neo.org/2015/01/08/np0-ssha-i-tsentral-naya-aziya/>], 4 August, 2015.