

Analysis

“Russian World”—Russia’s Soft Power Approach to Compatriots Policy

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Abstract

Russia uses its compatriots’ policy as a way of exerting soft power on neighboring countries. In order to reach as wide a group as possible, Russian policy-makers developed the concept of the “Russian World.” In pursuing its policy, the state has teamed up with the Russian Orthodox Church in promoting values that challenge the standard Western tradition. Russian television is popular in many neighboring countries and serves as a vehicle for spreading influence. The policy has raised concerns in the Baltic countries, but it is too early to evaluate its overall effectiveness.

A New Reliance on Soft Power

In his October 2008 interview to the newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced that Moscow’s relations with Russian compatriots residing abroad would be developed based on the principles of soft power. Soft power, as a new approach in Russia’s foreign policy, was first mentioned in the *Russian Foreign Policy Review* in 2007.

According to Joseph S. Nye, the chief proponent of the concept of *soft power*, its attractiveness is derived from three sources—culture (where it is perceived positively), values (if a state follows them both within and outside its borders) and foreign policy (if this policy is considered legitimate and morally grounded). Nye speaks about soft power which, contrary to its “hard” variety, can alter the behavior of countries without coercion or offering economic benefits. In other words, soft power stimulates others to wish what you wish, because you possess authority based on charisma.

Russia’s Compatriots Policy

Western researchers usually assess Russia’s chances of exerting soft power towards the West as limited. The situation is quite different with regard to Russia’s neighboring countries, especially the ethnic Russians and so-called Russian speakers residing there. Even though many of these individuals have become citizens of their host countries, Russia chooses to see them as its compatriots.

Who are these Russian compatriots residing abroad? Although a law defining this concept has been in force in Russia since 1999, the discussion is still ongoing. Amendments to the law were submitted for consideration to the State Duma in February 2010 with the aim of more precisely defining the term *compatriot*, stressing an individual’s self-identification and his/her practical connection with Russia. Such a connection could be, for example, membership in a Russian non-governmental organization (NGO) operating abroad. Critics

of the amendments inside Russia have already labeled them as creating a group of “professional compatriots”.

The previous definition of the term allowed Russian foreign policy makers to consider nearly all Russian-speaking residents of its neighboring countries as a target audience for its compatriots policy. Russia’s officially stated “concern” for this group allowed it to portray its active foreign policy towards the neighboring countries as a moral obligation. In practice, this “concern” has at times been little different from interference in the other countries’ internal affairs.

The debate on the principles of the compatriots’ policy has a lot to do with Russia’s ongoing search for identity. The multi-ethnic composition of the Russian population does not permit the proponents of its compatriots’ policy to base their concept on ethnicity. In her study entitled “Russian diaspora and the Russian compatriots”, Marlene Laruelle, a researcher at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, observes that Russia’s foreign-policy makers were faced with the task of finding a common denominator for compatriots living abroad that would somehow combine legal, ethnic and other aspects. Over-emphasizing one of these features over another might have caused problems for the policy. From this issue sprung the need for yet another concept, the “Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*),” which would forge a common bond between Russia and its emigrants who left at various times.

“The Russian World”

The term “Russian World” is generally understood to comprise not only the Russian diaspora itself, but also an ideological concept of Russian culture and its mission in the world. Petr Shchedrovitsky, Efim Ostrovsky, Valery Tishkov, Vitaly Skrinnik, Tatiana Poloskova and Natalia Narochnickaja are among the foremost authors of this concept. Its ideas were first formulated as early as the 1990s. In 2000, Schedrovitsky published an article entitled “Russian World and Transnational Russian Characteristics,”

in which he laid out the main ideas and objectives of the “Russian World” concept. Schedrovitsky identified the Russian language as one of its cornerstones. In doing so, he followed the ideas of the 18th century German philosopher Herder on the mutual correlation between the processes of language and thinking. Like Herder, Schedrovitsky believes that a culture may be understood and “learned” only through its carrier—language. He insists that those who *speak* Russian in their everyday life—also *think* Russian, and as a result—*act* Russian.

Initially, the concept of the “Russian World” was developed in parallel to, but independently of, the official Russian compatriots policy. Once Putin rose to power, this changed—the concept of the “Russian World” was henceforth promoted officially, too. Since belonging to a cultural-linguistic group is considered to be the main determinant of one’s belonging to the “Russian World,” its boundaries are not strictly delimited. This characteristic in turn allows Russian federal authorities to target their policy of “protecting compatriots’ interests” at a broad group of foreign countries’ citizens, flexibly adapting it to changing circumstances. Putin’s speech at the October 2001 Congress of Compatriots Residing Abroad supported such an approach: “The term ‘compatriot’ is definitely not a legal category. [...] For, since the very beginning, the concept ‘Russian World’ has gone far beyond the geographical boundaries of Russia and even beyond Russian ethnic boundaries.”

Competition of Values

As already mentioned, according to Nye’s concept of soft power, its sources may include particular values which are broadly perceived as belonging to a country’s identity, as well as its foreign policy. During Putin’s first term as president, the Russian power elite started searching for common ideological denominators that could serve as tools for the integration of society. A message uniting Russians at home could theoretically also be used for strengthening ties between Russia and its compatriots abroad. This approach is based on the Russian power elite’s conviction that Russian society needs a mobilizing idea. A topic that has risen to great popularity among Russian compatriots’ NGOs lately is the idea that the USSR’s victory in World War II is evidence of the state’s might and the nation’s muscle. Another preferred subject is the Russian Orthodox Church and its traditional cultural values as an alternative to the ideas of liberal democracy. The “Russian World” concept broadens the goals of the compatriots’ policy by linking it to the transcendent mission of the Russian people to defend and disseminate concrete values.

In his 28 January 2008 interview to the Russia Today television network, Andranik Migranian, a foreign policy expert close to Russia’s ruling elite, answered in the affirmative a journalist’s question about whether the recently established Institute for Democracy and Cooperation, with offices in New York and Paris, was a Russian soft power project. Migranian, who heads the Institute’s New York office, explained that its goal would not be to compete against Freedom House and similar organizations, but instead it was created to help the US understand Russia’s position on human rights and democracy issues.

The founding of the Institute exemplifies a new tendency in Russia’s approach to human rights and democracy matters. If previously official Russia, while criticizing the European Union for alleged double standards, routinely professed its adherence to universally accepted human rights norms, the new Institute’s task is to initiate a discussion on the very universality of certain human rights tenets. In this discussion, the Russian power elite has the keen backing of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).

Metropolitan Kirill, before taking office as the spiritual leader of the ROC, addressed the 10th World Russian People’s meeting on May 2006, and declared that a unique Russian civilization, consisting of Russia and the “Russian World,” should oppose Western civilization in its assertion of the universality of the Western tradition. Patriarch Kirill’s current activities and his statements in the context of “Russian World” indicate that under his leadership the Church will actively participate in further spreading the State’s compatriots’ policy.

From the point of view of its proponents, one of the advantages of involving the Russian Orthodox Church in the compatriots’ policy is that it removes the program from the purely political realm, at least to a certain extent. While the traditionally close relationship between church leaders and the secular authorities in Russia cannot be negated, those in political office may arguably reduce the likelihood and fierceness of attacks against state activities by teaming up with the church in promoting the compatriots policy. Religious freedom, highly regarded in the West, offers some degree of legitimacy to the international activities of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Instruments

As regards the implementation of soft power, Nye mentions daily communication, strategic communication and cooperation with opinion leaders. Through the Kremlin’s direct or indirect control of the country’s major television networks, the Russian power elite controls the tools for maintaining a more or less uniform interpretation of

events on the country's television channels, which are targeted at both domestic and foreign audiences. Russian television is quite popular in several CIS countries and in the Baltic States, especially among the so-called Russian speakers. For example, the strong influence of Russian media in Moldova is demonstrated by the fact that in 2008, Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, not the Moldovan leaders, ranked as the most popular politicians in opinion polls. Like their counterparts in Moldova, part of the Latvian and Estonian population in fact also lives within the information space of the Russian Federation.

With the help of satellite television, Russia's extensive and flourishing popular culture, comprising its growing film industry, pop music, modern literature and dramatic art tradition, make Russia a rather attractive regional power. Moreover, in recent years, television channels under direct or indirect governmental control appear to be purposely cultivating nostalgia for the Soviet period.

The Russian television channel "RTR Planeta" has begun to broadcast a series called "The best time in our life" about life in the USSR. Journalists from Russia have arrived in Latvia to shoot reports about the "good Soviet times" and "huge losses after the collapse of the USSR." And these are just a few examples. The cultivation of nostalgia for the USSR seems to suggest that maybe its restoration would not be too bad after all—if not in the form it once existed, then at least intellectually, with Moscow at its center.

Next to the media, NGOs are a second major channel for the implementation of soft power. NGO activities are one way of fostering changes in other countries' public opinion, as well as in the behavior of their politicians. The Kremlin reacted to the wave of "colored" revolutions in neighboring countries by establishing in 2006 and 2007 a number of NGOs, as well as activating cooperation with compatriots' organizations in the CIS, the Baltic countries and elsewhere in the world. The objective was to influence socio-political processes in the countries in a more favorable direction while at the same time preventing drastic political changes inside Russia.

In parallel to the Russian embassies, Moscow Houses and other official representative offices, the Russian World Foundation has an increasing share in managing the activities of pro-Russian NGOs in foreign countries. The establishment of the Russian World foundation in 2007 under the supervision of Vyacheslav Nikonov, a political scientist with close ties to the Kremlin, is one example of the practical implementation of the concept of "Russian World". Popularizing the Russian language

and culture abroad is among the main objectives of the foundation. *Russkiy Mir* enjoys financial support from the government, and the number of Russian centers established by it is rapidly growing. By 2010, *Russkiy Mir* had set up 50 Russian centers in 29 countries (including the US, Germany, China, etc.).

Hard Power Displays Limit Effectiveness of Soft Power

Smoothly-phrased slogans on the unity of the Orthodox world and the unique spiritual mission of Russia starkly contrast with the reality of Russia's foreign policy as exemplified by the military conflict with Georgia. Demonstrations of crude power are likely to compromise the effectiveness of the Kremlin's on-going soft power endeavors. Whether culture can successfully become a source of soft power depends on the concrete situation and the circumstances in which it is embedded.

Although a relatively large segment of the ethnic Russian population in neighboring countries has retained good Russian language skills, politicizing language issues is likely to alienate sizeable groups abroad from the "Russian World" idea and trigger counter-reactions. Unlike the so-called Russian speakers, the neighboring countries' political elites are much less prone to the appeal of Russian soft power. Though officially so-called Russian speakers are not dissuaded from maintaining and strengthening their ethnic identity, the political instrumentalization of such tendencies by the proponents of the Compatriots Policy is viewed as problematic by many. Thus, Russian compatriots policy does not always possess the attractiveness and moral sway which Nye would see as essential to its effectiveness.

Politicians and analysts in the Baltic States are increasingly concerned about the fact that the values popularized by Moscow in the neighboring countries are irreconcilable with democratic values. Former Communist countries in Russia's immediate neighborhood feel that the acuteness of their exposure to Russian influence is not always seen and understood further west. A fierce competition for people's hearts and minds has begun. The Russian soft power projects are by no means sporadic or coincidental, they have a long-term character, and they are not likely to end either tomorrow or the day after.

Both the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation and the other institutions involved in the implementation of the compatriots policy have been operating only for a relatively short period of time. It is thus still too soon for an objective assessment of their effectiveness.

About the Author

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