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Hard Questions About Soft Power: A Normative Outlook at Russia's Foreign Policy

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Political interest in the concept of soft power, introduced to the international academic community a few decades ago, has recently been revitalized after a series of mass uprisings in a number of countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Arguably, the substantive issues raised by the Arab Spring cannot merely be reduced to either energy matters or to the application of military force by the anti-Gaddafi coalition. The essence of these developments is profoundly normative, and this is how they were perceived by most European analysts, who were keen to raise a set of value-laden questions: how effective has the EU been as a “normative power” in its relations with neighboring autocratic regimes? Can other emerging powers—above all Turkey—become a better model for the Arab world? Can we expect the revolutionary virus to spread to other areas overwhelmed by authoritarian regimes, including the Caucasus and Central Asia? Against this dynamic background, it appears that the whole gamut of soft power issues—including the role of identities, norms, and values—will increasingly shape the EU's complicated relations with its neighbors. The largest of them, Russia, often seems to mimic Europe's soft power, and yet paradoxically this has not brought Moscow and Brussels closer to each other.

Russia's Soft Power: Imitating the West?

The concept of soft power elucidates the importance of immaterial policy tools (like the role of ideas, the power of attraction, and symbols), as opposed to more well-known physical and material instruments, including economic and military ones. The notion of soft power, which to a significant extent encompasses its predecessor—the idea of public diplomacy—goes much farther and embeds not only technical tools of either influencing or manipulating the policy-making machinery and public opinion in targeted countries, but also contains a strong normative potential which is unimaginable without an identification with certain political values. Indeed, soft power presupposes a value-laden identity capable of setting certain standards of social and political behavior, mostly based on externalizing successful domestic norms and projecting them beyond national borders. In this sense one may assume that the EU as well as its individual member states possess soft power resources, as epitomized by the Finnish “Northern

Dimension” program or the Polish-Swedish “Eastern Partnership” initiative.

Where does Russia stand among world actors who are eager to apply soft power techniques as part of their foreign policy? As one recent study assumes, Moscow has worked to effectively consolidate its influence in the post-Soviet area through soft power channels. The success of Russia's soft power activism in its neighborhood is due to an attractive visa-free travel policy, the rhetoric of fraternity, and the ubiquity of Russian media in most CIS countries.² Though most Russians would certainly take such a suggestion as a compliment, I would assess Russia's soft power potential with much more modesty. Soft power is effective only if its application generates and spreads positive social impulses and meanings. It is undeniable that the Russian labor market can be economically appealing to low-paid migrants from post-Soviet states, yet what counts is not the quantity of immigrants and the volume of their remittances, but the qualitative characteristics of their experiences in Russia, a country that is far from promoting integration and tolerance. Instead,

public attitudes towards immigrants all across Russia are characterized by estrangement, alienation, and enmity, which obviously do not create fertile ground for soft power. The fraternity narrative is very much past-oriented, lacks political dynamics, and thus fails to produce a convincing long-term vision of a common future. As for the Russian media beyond Russian borders, it mainly translates commercial entertainment products and lacks strong political messages. Even if these messages become discernible, many of them are perceived as derogatory by neighboring countries that are too often depicted by Russian journalists as unstable and insolvent troublemakers.

In the meantime, while some might assess the state of Russian soft power in positivist terms (i. e. as either decreasing or increasing), I have a different outlook. Russia did recognize the importance of soft power as a—perhaps auxiliary and facultative—ingredient of diplomacy, which by itself is a serious step forward when one takes into account the legacy of the overwhelmingly materialist and technocratic thinking that dominates in the Kremlin. In the traditions of the Soviet mentality, most Russian policy makers perhaps view soft power as a “Western invention,” or even as an element of what in the Cold War was dubbed “ideological warfare” to which Russia has to respond somehow. Such an attitude has made Russia’s first steps in the soft power terrain overtly imitative and reactive both in form (the establishment of the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation—IDC³—with two foreign offices in Paris and New York, was a mimetic gesture by the Kremlin in response to American and European foundations operating in Russia) and in substance (Russia’s soft power narrative addressed to the post-Soviet elites is constituted by an overt and inevitable “contrast” between a Russian-led—and still quite hypothetical—model of integration on the one hand, and the existing Western institutions, including the EU and NATO, on the other). Yet these endeavors are far from effective: the two branches of IDC are overwhelmingly perceived as propaganda platforms rather than as intellectual think tanks; while the attempts to lure neighboring countries by offering them “full sovereignty,” as opposed to the alleged dissolu-

tion of their sovereignties in case of both EU and NATO membership, are equally unworkable and counter-productive. In countries like Moldova and Ukraine at least, Russia’s clumsy attempts to switch to the language of soft power tend to produce the opposite of the results expected by the Kremlin’s spin-doctors.

Russian Soft Power: Three Major Concepts

Yet it would be erroneous to discard Russia’s ability to play soft power games of its own. The operationalization of soft power is a learning process that Russia is now experiencing—albeit slowly and controversially. Since soft power is an ideational phenomenon, it has to be analyzed as part of a set of politically instrumentalizable concepts. Three of them can be singled out as the core ideas that shape the contours of Russian soft power: selective pro-democracy rhetoric, the idea of a democratization of international relations, and a variety of civilizational approaches.

First, Russia adheres to selective pro-democracy rhetoric mostly in its relations with countries that display an explicit pro-Western orientation. The most illustrative examples are perhaps Ukraine and Georgia following their “color revolutions”: the Kremlin rebuffed Kiev’s plans to join NATO not only as contravening Russian interests, but also as “undemocratic” due to the deficit of popular support among Ukrainians. In the same vein, the Kremlin dubbed the Saakashvili regime in Georgia “undemocratic” because of its alleged oppression against the opposition and suppression of ethnic minorities. Preceding this, Moscow had started to question the Baltic states’ adherence to democratic norms that, in Russian eyes, fails to guarantee European democratic standards for Russian-speaking groups. Much less pronounced is the role of pro-democracy discourse in Russia’s communicative relations with less Westernized countries; thus, Moscow only sporadically raised the issue of the authoritarian nature of Alexander Lukashenko’s regime in Belarus (basically using mass media for delivering its messages), and quite

pragmatically called the overthrow of Kurmanbek Bakiev's regime in Kyrgyzstan a legitimate form of popular protest against corrupt and oppressive rule. In the meantime, Russia seldom raised the issue of democracy in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Turkmenistan, or Uzbekistan, as well as the break-away territories of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, or Nagorno-Karabakh.

Second, Russia has tried to make its foreign policy more attractive to the non-Western world through the idea of democratizing the international political scene, as epitomized by the concept of democratic multipolarity. In accordance to its logic, the ideal of a plurality of power holders is re-signified as not only part of an old realist approach, but also as an appealing normative value. According to the Kremlin's vision, unipolarity is authoritarian, while multipolarity is democratic. This is certainly an explicitly ideological conception, since it requires the tacit dethroning of the West from the global normative pedestal.

In this reading, democracy appears to be void of political meanings and reduced to the mere multiplicity of sovereign states, regardless of the internal nature of their political regimes. Not incidentally, Russia uses the "democratic multipolarity" rhetoric when dealing with countries like China, Belarus, Iran, Venezuela, India, and Cuba, most of which lack a convincing record of domestic democratic rule. "Democratic multipolarity" thus makes the issues of liberty, free competition, and other core elements of democracy either irrelevant or equally acceptable along with authoritarianism, totalitarianism, a non-market economy, etc.

Yet the Kremlin also employs the idea of international democracy in a quite different context. Thus, according to its 2008 Foreign Policy Concept, Russia's policy goal in Europe is not any type of order, but a "genuinely open and democratic system of collective security."⁴ There are two conceptual problems with this statement. First, it to some extent disavows the logic of "democratic multipolarity" by arguing that not only pluralism, but solidarity (normative conformity in the security field) can also be democratic provided that it serves Russia's interest in being accepted as an equal power to

its Western partners. Besides, the Kremlin's understanding of the security-democracy nexus diverges significantly from the views dominating in the West, where it necessarily involves the issues of development, human rights protection, public oversight of military and security institutions, etc.

Third, Russia tries to make use of the concept of a dialogue of civilizations that has more than one meaning. The most typical political articulation can be found in Dmitry Medvedev's reference to the European Union, the United States, and Russia as three branches of European civilization destined to cooperate closely with each other. Therefore, both the unity of a wider European civilization and the compatibility of its different territorial parts are taken almost for granted, which relieves Russia of improving its institutional performance and making binding commitments aimed at facilitating a painful Europeanization process. Instead, Moscow prefers the policy of convincing the West to accept Russia's historical membership in the presumably common European civilization.

Yet academic discourses offer a much more varied panoply of views that seem to be in disharmony with the political discourse in two very significant regards—not all of them depart from a state-centric platform, and not all are that friendly towards the West. It is remarkable that some versions of civilization-based discourse articulate a certain mistrust of the state. The plurality of civilizations as a particular case of normative plurality makes references to states indispensable. Civilizational resources are believed to be relatively independent of political elites, and are viewed as compensating for Russia's weakness as a nation. This reasoning sounds quite in tune with the anticipations of gradual transformations in political subjectivity—from nation states to a type of new multi-nodal composite actors based upon durable communications between culturally, religiously, and linguistically related communities.

Much less admirable are disagreements with Russia's role as an inalienable part of an integral all-European civilization among experts in Russia. In the case of such denial, the civilizational discourse, instead of playing the role of a soft power con-

nector, turns into a deliberately vast container of the most parochial and extremely mythologized perceptions of Russia's historical self. Moreover, the articulation of Russia's cultural peculiarity can be instrumental in de-actualizing a broad variety of the most acute social and administrative problems in Russia and its civilizational neighbors (Ukraine and Belarus), including corruption, the lack of rule of law, mismanagement, authoritarian trends in politics, etc.

In the Russian academic literature one may find at least two practical implementations of the civilizational approach. Both look very dubious from the soft power vantage point. One example is BRICS, a group of countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) that, according to some Russian commentators, embodies not only economic rationale but also a sort of "dialogue" of civilizational cores. However, in spite of this optimism, it is the soft power dimension that is lacking in the whole concept of BRICS, which by now represents a loosely tied association of economic partners with strong power ambitions and minimal normative potential.

Another practical example of this civilization-based worldview is the "Russian world" concept, which again is a matter of different interpretations. The Russian Orthodox Church sees it as a predominantly religious concept, while for the Kremlin and the Russkiy Mir Foundation⁵ it serves as a tool for projecting Russia's cultural and political influence abroad. Yet blueprints often differ from the administrative practices of the Russian state, which when faced with a choice between soft power and material gains usually gives preference to the latter. This was clearly illustrated by the deep conflict between the Russian state and the Russian community of Côte-d'Azur, France, provoked by a series of legal actions initiated by the presidential administration in Moscow in order to reinstitute the ownership of the largest Orthodox church in Nice. The French court has taken the Kremlin's side in the dispute, which resulted in a de-facto confrontation between Moscow and the Russian diaspora.⁶

This particular incident only substantiates those sociological observations that claim that language

as such is an insufficient factor for cementing Russia's soft power in countries with large numbers of "compatriots living abroad." As a Russian author claims, Russian-speaking communities in the West regard the Soviet times not as an organic part of the Russian civilizational history, but as a deviation from it. Concomitantly, they question the political relevance of the ideas of continuity and succession, as well as the legitimacy of the Soviet-Russian social and administrative mix that appears to be constitutive for the current Russian state. This means that the cultural symbols cultivated from above diverge from those attitudes that dominate in the milieu of Russian émigré communities.⁷ This is also the case of Russian-speakers in neighboring countries, including the Baltic States, which remain relatively immune to the politically motivated projects sponsored by Moscow. As for countries like Moldova, the Russian version of "cultural diplomacy" has triggered a malign effect in the form of activities of local groups that are ironically dubbed "professional Russians" for their pragmatic exploitation of Moscow's disbursement of large sums of money aimed at patronizing ethnic Russians.

Who Are the Addressees?

Who are the addressees of this type of highly selective and pragmatic soft power discourse? There are three possible answers to this question.

First, one may argue that Russia uses normative arguments to substantiate its power positions vis-à-vis CIS neighbors. Therefore, Russia seeks to get positive feedback from—and thus exercise influence among—post-Soviet elites, utilizing multiple and sometimes misplaced references to their "common history" and shared Soviet pedigree. The key problem here is both mental and organizational, and it boils down to the unfortunate Soviet tradition of dividing political and intellectual elites into "pro-Western" and "pro-Russian" segments. My personal experience of shortly working with Priznanie Foundation⁸ in Moldova in 2009 strongly confirms this view. The deficiency of this "black-and-white" approach becomes an obvious obstacle for Russian policy towards Georgia, which simply lacks any "pro-Russian" candidates for the highest

administrative positions, at least according to Russian standards. “Post-Orange” Ukraine sheds even more doubts on the practicality of differentiating between “pro-Russian” and “pro-Western” politicians: Viktor Yanukovich, who before his accession to presidency was almost entirely presented as belonging to the first category, in less than a year made not only a number of explicitly pro-European gestures, but even initiated the process of abrogating gas agreements with Russia signed by his predecessors.

Second, Russia is keen to resort to soft power rhetoric in communicating with the political elites of countries that have positioned themselves as alternatives to the domination of the West, including China, India, Brazil, Venezuela, Iran, Turkey, etc. Since Russia has to somehow attune its discourse to the political ideologies of the non-Western world, and some of its soft power moves converge with post-colonial discourse with its resistance to the domination of the West and the longing for more equitable relations among state actors.

Third, soft power may constitute a meaningful element of Russia’s drive for recognition from Europe. That is why Russia wants to be equal to the West, including in the normative domain. Seen from this angle, the important addressee of Russia’s soft power messages are political elites in both Europe and America. A good example here is the Kremlin’s attack on those post-Soviet and post-socialist authorities that it accuses of “re-writing the history of the Second World War” as the heroic script of liberating Eastern European peoples from fascism. In posing as a “defender” of the normative order based on an anti-Nazi consensus, Moscow not only tries to reach policy makers in Central European and Baltic countries, but above all to remind major EU member states that even the Stalin-led Soviet Union was a legitimate partner of today’s Euro-Atlantic security institutions.

Yet Russia’s strategy of postulating its European identity won’t bear any fruit unless Moscow starts seriously integrating into the normative order that has emerged in the West since the fall of the Berlin Wall. What dramatically hinders all Russian attempts to activate its soft power tools is Mos-

cow’s visible disengagement from the core domains of this normative order. Two examples seem to be quite illustrative at this juncture. One is Russia’s skeptical attitude towards the concept of human security that is still perceived in the Kremlin as an alien and unnecessary policy propagated by the West. Another example is Russia’s disinterest in joining the international normative mechanisms aimed at promoting economic transparency and financial accountability, which is increasingly important from the European perspective. In particular, Russia showed no interest in the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative in which dozens of oil- and gas-producing and transporting countries, including many of Russia’s neighbors (Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Mongolia), have taken part. Against this backdrop, the normative disconnections between Russia and Europe are likely to stay profoundly divisive in the foreseeable future, a situation which will keep constraining Russia’s soft power potential and depriving Russia of policy leverage in wider Europe, including its near abroad.

Conclusion

As this brief analysis has shown, Russia tends to apply soft power quite selectively and pragmatically. In some cases, Russia’s sporadic usage of pro-democracy rhetoric is aimed at pressuring the leaders of adjacent countries and making them more compliant to Russian economic and security demands. Yet in questioning the democratic credentials of Ukraine under former President Viktor Yushenko and Georgia under President Mikhail Saakashvili, Russia was playing a more complicated game: apart from exerting pressure upon the governments that resulted from the “colour revolutions,” the Kremlin was eager to demonstrate their mismatch with the European standards of democracy and thus to reproach both the EU and NATO for giving them support. The same goes for Russia’s devotion to democracy-grounded rhetoric in its relations with the three Baltic countries that is aimed at unveiling their adherence to “non-European” minority policies.

What the European countries can do in this situation is perhaps to stimulate public debates with

Russian interlocutors on the most successful examples of soft power as an indispensable instrument of tackling political and security challenges, including peacemaking and conflict resolution. The EU member states may also be instrumental in fostering professional discussions on the normative principles that are constitutive for European identity which Russia is so desperately eager to share.

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Notes

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- 2 Nicu Popescu and Andrew Wilson, *The Limits of Enlargement-Lite: European and Russian Power in the Troubled Neighbourhood* (European Council on Foreign Relations, ECFR Policy Report), London, June 2009, p. 3–4.
- 3 ICD was established as an institution aimed at promoting the Kremlin’s vision of Russia’s taken-for-granted particularity and, therefore, to legitimate its own version of democracy. See the web site of ICD at <<http://www.indemco.org/>>.
- 4 Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации, July 15, 2008, <<http://kremlin.ru/acts/785>>.
- 5 The foundation patronized by the Kremlin and aimed at assisting Russian compatriots living abroad, see <<http://www.russkiymir.ru>>.
- 6 In: *Kommersant*, Nr. 163, September 2, 2011, p. 5.
- 7 Viacheslav Popkov, *Russkoyazychnie prostranstva za rubezhom: spetsyfyka formirovaniya i osnovnie osobennosti*, in: *Vestnik Instituta Kennana v Rossii* 19/2011, p. 56.
- 8 A charity foundation aimed at supporting the Russian-language educational and academic projects in Crimea (Ukraine) and Transdnistria, see <<http://www.fond-priznanie.ru/about/>>.

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