

Commentary

RUSSIAN SOFT POWER AND THE WEST

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Deriving from the premise that seduction might be in many ways preferable to intimidation, *soft power* is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced.”² Instead of (or, in addition to) the traditional reliance on military might and economic clout, soft power lies in the capacity to beguile and persuade. It includes propaganda, but is appreciably broader than a mere public relations campaign or an appeal to ephemeral popularity. Accordingly, it constitutes very real power - an ability to gain objectives.

The Russian Federation may seem a *prima facie* unlikely candidate for a state longing to wield soft power, but recent years have seen Moscow’s cautious efforts to engage in alternative strategies so as to augment its credibility allure globally. For instance, Russia Today has been launched as an international multilingual television channel, whilst the country is also scheduled to host the 2014 Winter Olympics and the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

In spite of its reputation for less-than-delicate conduct on the international stage (typically hyperbolised in the blundering bear caricature), during the 20th century Russia has not been entirely devoid of the power of attraction. The Soviet Union’s uncompromising resistance to Hitler was very effective in appealing to the sympathies of many in Europe after the Second World War. In response to the horrible realities of extermination and widespread devastation, the ideal of pursuing a model society based on altruism and the common good emerged in the eyes of the underprivileged around the globe as an entirely sensible aspiration. Nevertheless, a closed, sclerotic system and the dearth of popular culture impeded the ability of the USSR to compete with the US in terms of sheer appeal and turned out to be a decisive and often overlooked factor in the eventual outcome of the Cold War.

Admittedly, Russia’s present chances of exerting soft power towards the West remain restricted. It is frequently a source of incredulity to me the extent that knowledgeable, internationally sophisticated and by-and-large well-intentioned pundits in the UK are swayed by popular attention-grabbers and impetuously lionise dubious causes, along the lines of incarcerated robber barons or female performers prosecuted for maladroitness political capers.

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² Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York, 2004.

The vast divergence in appraisal of such affairs between the general public in the West and in Russia demonstrates the insurmountable gap that Moscow's soft power exertions have yet to bridge in order to amplify its influence in western countries.

Several years of life and work in Russia, advising government agencies and large corporations, have provided me with a modicum of perception of the likely soft power potential of such entities. If truth be told, few of them should be expecting any awards for the 'attractiveness of their ideals and policies' any time soon. On the other hand, one of the most compelling instruments of cultural impact is education –and tertiary education in particular:

I spent April 2012 giving daily lectures to the students of the Master in International Finance Law at MGIMO. This was a very worthwhile experience, which corroborated the importance of one of soft power's core elements – the calm authority of higher learning. In its organisation and running, MGIMO, one of the top institutions in the country, has nothing to be envious of when compared to the world's other top-ranked Universities. In what regards the students in my own class, I found the good ones amongst them as engaging, diligent and enthusiastic as any I might have come across in Cambridge. And their knowledge of the English language was often astonishing. As for the inevitably existing less-than-good students, it was quite obvious that their poorer performance was not attributable to some personal deficiency or shortcomings in the academic environment, but it was due to the very same cause that may generate lacklustre students in Cambridge, Yale, the Sorbonne or anywhere else: they were simply a trifle idle...

If we are to gauge soft power by the capability of enticement and an intrinsic acceptance of values, then it becomes quite obvious that Russia has significant catching up to do vis-à-vis the West. People after all appear to have voted with their feet: in the last two decades millions of Russians have travelled, studied, visited and emigrated to Europe and North America, whilst equivalent numbers in the opposite direction remain negligible. Supporting and improving international-level university education in Russia is certainly one way to reverse this trend.