

# ‘Forced to Friendship’? Russian (Mis-)Understandings of Soft Power and the Implications for Audience Attraction in Ukraine

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This article argues that for all its efforts to implement soft power techniques, the Kremlin still fails to grasp the subtle, voluntaristic essence of soft power. This is reflected in a style of public interaction that has practical implications for how Russian soft power overtures are received by the audience. This is demonstrated through the findings of mixed-method empirical research from four Ukrainian regions. Thus, while surveys show that the worldview promoted by Russian public diplomacy resonates to some extent, insights from focus groups indicate that potential attraction is nevertheless limited by Russia’s ‘hard’ and obtrusive approach to cultural influence.

**Keywords:** Russia; Ukraine; soft power; audience reception; focus groups

## Introduction

The crisis that has escalated in Ukraine since November 2013 has sharply foregrounded the continued significance of military power in European security affairs. However, the conflict between the Kyiv government and the pro-Russian rebels in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine has a strong informational element, with the opposing sides striving to advance their own narrative of the unfolding crisis to legitimise their actions and garner international and domestic support. While currently reflected in the stoking of passionate and polarising responses to events on the ground, the crisis is rooted in a more general cleavage in the worldview of Ukrainians, who over the past two-and-a-half decades have found themselves on the geopolitical frontline in a soft power struggle waged between Russia and the West. Playing on local commercial and industrial interests as well as historically rooted identity and language issues, each side has sought to secure Ukraine in its orbit on its own terms through a network of financial-economic, interpersonal and cultural ties. The West’s promotion of an attractive culture and lifestyle to support this process has become known as ‘soft power’, which Russia has also striven latterly to integrate into policy.

This article argues that while Russia recognises the importance of regenerating its cultural appeal and public diplomacy capacity, research suggests that the specific, voluntaristic and non-coercive nature of this ‘soft’ form of influence has thus far not been fully grasped by the relevant sections of the Russian elite. This was reflected in the findings of an original empirical study undertaken to explore how one section of the Ukrainian audience – namely the highly educated youth – received Russian soft power overtures, with the aim of evaluating the success of the Kremlin’s ‘charm offensives’ to date. The findings of the unique, in-depth

fieldwork in four diverse regions of Ukraine are presented to show how, in spite of the significant, albeit regionally differentiated wells of affinity with Russian cultural, value-oriented and political perspectives, the appeal of Moscow's leadership is limited by the rather widespread impression that even Russia's efforts at soft power engagement are but a propagandist's velvet glove around the iron fist of Moscow's neo-imperial machinations. Such perceptions, which were found to transcend the East–West cleavage, condition how individuals and groups respond to the current conflict.

When Nye's main conceptual elaboration of 'attraction' as a foreign policy tool appeared in 2004, likely responses to the suggestion that Russia might be nurturing soft power would probably have included incredulity, scepticism and possibly mirth. Recent events in Ukraine would seem to bear out the views of such sceptics. But soft and hard power are inextricably bound together, both in theory and practice, and consideration of the Kremlin's attempts to rekindle cultural attraction is vital since attempts to integrate Ukrainians into the cultural-ideational space of the *russkiy mir* ['Russian world'] are unlikely to cease even with the resolution of the crisis. Indeed, it was Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution which, in exposing the insufficiency of Russia's political and cultural engagement with its closest neighbour, forced sections of the Moscow elite to recognise the need to enhance Russia's attraction abroad. In the three to four years following the events on Kyiv's *Maidan Nezaleznosti*, perceptions of Russia in the world and its ability to renew ties with citizens of the former Soviet republics were a matter for discussion on the pages of the nation's newspapers and periodicals, and among policy and intellectual circles. Since 2007, soft power has been increasingly embodied in policy documents (President of Russia, 2008; 2009; 2013) and found expression in the establishment of a number of organisations and bodies charged with increasing the profile of the Russian language, culture and worldview abroad (Feklyunina, 2008). However, even today it would be overstating the case to argue that Russia has a coherent strategy to restore its cultural attraction. Rather, activity in this sphere is often fragmented and unsystematic. Indeed, Moscow acknowledges (Burlinova, 2013; Dolinskiy, 2013; Kosachev, 2014) that Russia's representatives are struggling to implement measures designed to foster soft power with optimal efficiency. For his part, Joseph Nye (2013) argues simply that Russia does not 'get' soft power. This article will explore this contention in more depth and investigate the implications for Russia's attraction among a key section of the Ukrainian audience.

Ukraine is a particularly interesting case study as it straddles a strategic intersection of the European continent with implications for energy, food and identity security. Furthermore, the high degree of cultural proximity and the relatively extensive integration characteristic of the Russian and Ukrainian media-informational spheres suggest that to investigate the Ukrainian case study could be to explore the high water mark of Russian soft power. Rather than examining elite outlooks, this study focuses on reception among the general population, which President Medvedev declared should be targeted by Russian soft power efforts (Medvedev, 2009). Taking a future-oriented approach, the focus will be on the highly educated youth who represent the next generation of Ukrainian leaders and opinion-multipliers.

## Conceptual framework

Joseph Nye (2004) frames soft power as getting what you want in international politics through attraction, not coercion. More specifically, soft power is understood here as the ability of a polity to exercise international cultural leadership in terms of 'setting the agenda' for global norms and being perceived as attractive within the framework of those values and

rationalities as a mean to co-opting support for the polity's foreign policy objectives. In contrast to one- and two-dimensional understandings of power (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Dahl, 1957), which stress observable change as criteria to evidence power, this study is inspired by a three- (Lukes, 1974; 2005) or even four- (Digeser, 1992) dimensional understanding of power that does not demand directly observable changes in behaviour to identify power at work. Rather, as a result, soft power is viewed as an accumulated ideological *potential*, which may then serve to discursively frame certain policies as politically possible. Thus, the outcomes concerned will not in the first instance be behavioural modifications or policy shifts, but rather are of an attitudinal nature – i.e. they concern the response of the target audience to the communicated message. This may or may not require an actual change in opinion among the subjects under investigation, or it may simply reflect the perpetuation of value constellations and their preservation in the face of the pressure of alternative views being promoted in a particular society.

As within the nation state, cultural influence on the international level is a result of a long-term, cumulative and accruing (Fairclough, 2001, p. 43) process of socialisation and enculturation brought about by 'socialising agencies' (Curran, 2002, p. 139) and 'cultural apparatuses' (Said, 1981, p. 43). Such 'soft power tools' communicating a polity's ideas and values are often actively welcomed in foreign states, in the form of outlets of cultural diplomacy, international news, entertainment media, social media, nongovernmental organisations, charities and so on.

Yet while such media of communication can in principle shape audience perceptions, values and self-understanding, the measures above do not inevitably yield the result intended, as audiences respond in different ways to the same stimuli and exert friction on the transmission process, which thereby assumes characteristics of an active process of negotiation (Castells, 2009; Fairclough, 2001, p. 207; Hall, 1973; Neuman, 1991, p. 88). As such, audience reception is not merely mediated by the 'objective' merits of the culture, values and ideas promoted, but is rather also dependent on the context in which the message is received. Pre-existing ideas held by the audience, personal experience, the credibility and trustworthiness of the source and polity concerned as well as the extent and quality of the communications of competing opinion formers all act as filters (Curran, 2002, p. 158), mitigating how audience members negotiate a message. Thus, while communicative actors charged with enhancing soft power strive to set the agenda through a variety of framing and priming techniques (Castells, 2009), audience members resemble less vessels waiting to be filled (as conceived by traditional 'blunt' propaganda [Curran, 2002, p. 62]) than pre-painted canvases onto which another layer may be added with a greater or lesser degree of impact depending on the residual effect of the preceding coats.

Accordingly, the extent of soft power must be judged based on the target audience's reception of the soft power offerings, and specifically, of the *actual* narrative advanced by the aspirant soft power's communication outlets rather the abstract notion of 'prevailing global norms' suggested by Nye (2004, pp. 31–32). Soft power may be said to be present to the extent that the narratives disseminated evoke a positive response among an audience of foreign citizens: assumptions and values that resonate will not only be tacitly accepted as credible and true, but will also inform attitudes, expectations and behaviour and be reproduced in audiences' own utterances without fundamental critique. In short, rather than being reflected in explicit and overt support for a given position or polity, soft power may be observed in audiences' implicitly consent to the 'common sense' rationality of truth promulgated; their worldview

will appear congruent with the target discourse. Individuals, groups and organisations co-opted into the discourse become agents, whether witting or not, of its wider dissemination since their spontaneous reproduction of the discourse serves to reinforce it as a societal structure and contributes to its normalisation as 'common sense'.

Thus, to approximate the salience of Russian soft power in Ukraine, it is necessary to not focus exclusively on the narrative advanced and the 'tools' of its diffusion, but rather undertake reception research to explore how audience members negotiate the target discourse. Given this approach, in order to evaluate the extent of a polity's attraction and agenda-setting potential among a given target audience, a triangulated, mixed method approach is required. First, a quantitative survey of audience outlook facilitates comparison between sections of the sample, while satisfying the methodological demand for reliability and generalisability. Second, focus groups elicit rich qualitative data enabling the statistical findings to be understood within the appropriate context and hence more roundly since quantitative surveys give neither insight into the rationale for an opinion nor help the researcher to understand how certain discourses are negotiated by audiences. The group dynamic is also significant since it simulates the everyday conversations through which the inter-subjectively constructed notions of identity and value norms emerged (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996, p. 94) through direct access to the language and concepts that structure participants' experiences (Hughes and DuMont, 1993). The interactive nature of focus groups also indicates a relatively sound means of generating valid data since 'participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other that weed out false or extreme views ... and it is fairly easy to assess the extent to which there is a relatively consistent, shared view ... among the participants' (Patton, 1990, pp. 335–336, cited in Flick, 2002, p. 113).

### **Russia as an aspirant soft power**

Russia has a rather different understanding of itself as a player on the international stage than that of most European countries. Despite the lingering weaknesses of the post-Soviet period, there is a sense that Russia has, by its own estimation, sufficient resources at its disposal to preserve its historical subjectivity, to retain its claim to the status, if not of a superpower, then certainly a major player in global affairs and a leader in the region in its own right. This is grounded in its vast territory, its nuclear arsenal, its large – if shrinking – population and its generous endowment in terms of natural resources, which make a wager on Russia's sovereign future a realistic prospect. Yet, as Okara (2007) observes, raw material utility has not been sufficient to provide an orientation to post-Soviet Russia and to stem centrifugal tendencies. To provide a guiding meta-narrative for society [*sterzhen*], a new Russian idea was sought, and found – albeit it not without controversy – in the broad notion of 'conservative modernisation' (Nikonov, 1994; Trenin, 2010): economic progress without the liberal flattening of cultural difference and tradition. Cultural heritage is foundational to Russia's claim to be a centre with something unique to offer the future of human civilisation, and not merely a nation state following meekly in liberalism's well-trodden path.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia suffered a crisis of identity in relation to how the post-Soviet state should be imagined, the appropriate national guiding values and objectives and, thus, which policies should be followed. Under President Putin's leadership, the country has followed a pragmatic course and national policy has trodden a path between the visions outlined by liberals and those pressing for a more aggressively nationalist stance. Yet debate over these contending visions of the identity to be ascribed to the post-Soviet state

remains animated. The lack of deep-rooted consensus is partly to blame for the absence of an overall soft power strategy, which is reflected not only in a generalised lack of cooperation between soft power 'tools', but also in the fact that the visions, objectives and narratives of the different approaches to (re-)cultivating Russian soft power are not always complimentary and sometimes outright contradictory as they are driven by the interests of different elite groups. A focus on the audience reception of soft power overtures requires a clear sense of the target narrative, however. Thus, this study focuses on a single approach – namely, that embodying Russia's official civilisational discourse, which is particularly relevant to the case of Ukraine.

Indeed, Ukraine has a crucial part to play in this geopolitical aspiration, which goes a long way towards explaining the Kremlin's tough response towards the country's recent moves towards Western integration. Russian national interests and the rights of 'compatriots' are cited as grounds for concern (Putin, 2014), but the reason why these issues are perceived so emotively rests on a fear of 'losing' Ukraine to the contending Western civilisation. Fellow East Slavic, Orthodox Ukrainians are considered a kindred people, and Russia traces its statehood back to the medieval state of Kievan Rus', with the Ukrainian capital often called the 'mother of Russian cities'. Should fraternal nation Ukraine turn its back on Russia, then Moscow's claim to civilisational radiance looks hollow and weak (Leontyev, 2009), and even poses troubling questions about the viability of the Russian Federation as a sovereign state within its current borders (Surkov, 2007). The friendship or at least neutrality of Ukraine is thus seen as vital. As one commentator with close links to mainstream patriotic sections of the Kremlin during the second Putin administration stated in an interview in July 2011, 'we must get Ukraine back', explaining he did not mean by territorial annexation, but rather by Ukraine's reintegration into Russia's cultural and ideological space.

### **Russia's civilisational discourse**

According to Nye (2004), soft power is based upon the appeal of soft power resources; a polity's culture, values and foreign policy approach. Russia's contributions in this regard are discernible on the basis of analysis of the narratives generated by three key institutions, which may be considered to represent official discourse on civilisational topics and serve as cue-givers for other information outlets. The target narratives were identified on the basis of wide reading of texts produced by the three agents identified, as 'if discursive structures operate in a political space, they will show up in any text' (Wæver, 2005, p. 40). To this end, texts generated by the relevant three institutions were analysed over the period 2008–2011, until saturation point was reached and no new key narratives emerged.

First, the *Russkiy Mir* [Russian World] Foundation offers insight into official positions on culture. It is a state-funded cultural diplomacy institution established by presidential decree in 2007 as a joint project of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Science with the aim of promoting the Russian language and Russian positions on culture and history around the world. The main source of information was the foundation's website (<http://russkiymir.ru>), including features, articles and speeches by senior representatives. Over this time, the texts available here increased in number greatly, as the debate developed, but the narrative's core assumptions were rather consistent.

Second, the Russian Orthodox Church was selected as it not only has longstanding ties to the Russian state and national identity, but also claims to share a sense of responsibility for Russia's fate and is working to rekindle a foundation of moral values in society. Yet the Russian Church is not a homogenous entity in terms of the outlooks of its representatives and

followers (Mitrofanova, 2005). This study thus refers primarily to the official position advanced by the Head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus' Kirill, who has been very active in cultivating Russian relations with Ukraine and modernising the approach of the Church to external relations. The concrete textual sources include policy documents – particularly the Social Concept; the church's Basic Teaching on Freedom, Dignity and Human Rights (Russian Orthodox Church, 2000) – and speeches given by Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia (2011).

Third, the Kremlin's foreign policy discourse was ascertained through examination of the key policy documents and public speeches of foreign policy leaders – above all, those of the Russian President and Foreign Minister – given between 2006 and 2011, as accessed from the relevant official websites (<http://www.kremlin.ru>; <http://www.mid.ru>). Although there was a shift in tone between the Putin and Medvedev presidencies, the core assumptions and perspectives have not demonstrably changed from the view of the world expressed by President Putin in his famous February 2007 address to the Munich Security Conference (Richters, 2012, p. 11).

Although disentangled into three strands for analytical purposes, the narratives promoted are mutually reinforcing and interdependent; the propositions advanced as 'attractive' are simultaneously employed as reference points to underpin agenda-setting initiatives. Indeed, interaction between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russkiy Mir Foundation bucks the trend towards non-coordination among soft power 'tools'; with relations between the two rather characterised by 'close cooperation', as a Russian political consultant with particular expertise on soft power explained in an interview conducted with the author in Moscow in July 2011. The cultural and value-related narratives advanced by these institutions preserve and develop the cultural and spiritual characteristics that are presented as distinguishing Russia from the West and underpin Moscow's claim to civilisational uniqueness. The themes and underlying assumption of these discourses are not original as such, but draw intertextually upon the narratives of previous eras to borrow their familiar legitimacy, rearticulating their discursive elements for new circumstances (Kristeva, 1980, cited in Hansen, 2006, p. 56). The existence of a sovereign, unique [*samobytnyi*] cultural space justifies policies under the rubric of sovereign democracy which proceed from the assumption that Russia has cultural traditions requiring universal values and models to be implemented in ways that account for such specificities. Thus, though the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russkiy Mir Foundation stress their distance from political engagement as such, these discourses have significant meta-political implications. The main discursive parameters of each will now be outlined.

With regard to culture, Russia's soft power discourse is predicated upon the assumption that the distinctive culture and traditions of ethno-national communities should be preserved as meaningful categories in human society. Moreover, the discourse assumes the existence of a 'Russian world' – a notion that has become increasingly familiar in recent years, despite being fluidly defined. The Russian world is often promoted as a supra-national or civilisation-level tier of identity, defined variously – depending on the position of the speaker – on the basis of ethnicity, native language, religion, interest in Russia, or historical ties to the Russian Federation. Many of these criteria coincide in the case of Ukraine, which is seen as a fraternal nation, though this narrative has been contested and reframed in terms of imperialism by Ukrainian nation-building elites since the end of the USSR. In every case, Russia is



discursively positioned as a country with a prestigious and globally significant cultural heritage, and proposes the Russian language as the natural *lingua franca* for the Soviet successor states.

The value discourse strives to cultivate a sense of what Russia and the Russian world stands for – namely, in principle at least, as a polity offering a protected place to spirituality, morality and tradition within the framework of public discourse. As such, the Russian Orthodox Church has become one of the major players in the field of Russia-Ukraine relations – a fact that is likely driven not only by of the spiritual significance of Kyiv for the Russian Church, but also by the ‘competition for souls’ from different denominations in the country since the end of the USSR. As bearers of the legacy of Holy Rus’, Ukrainians are invited to avow themselves to a spiritually elevated identity as part of a spiritual people anointed with the task of reclaiming and preserving a neglected part of Europe’s heritage. Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia (2011), head of the Church, advances the claim that it is possible to think about a progressive and just world system based on universal principles differently defined. Yet, despite the Church’s key role in its promotion, the value discourse is often less overtly religious than ‘national-spiritual’ in its content. Thus the narrative often focuses on the markers to differentiate the Russian world and the West, which are often found in conservative attitudes towards homosexuality, a denunciation of consumerism and the elevation of traditional outlooks.

The political aspects of the soft power discourse present key assumptions about contemporary Russia, its role in the world and provide a commentary on contemporary global affairs. Accordingly, Russia is a strong country with a historically rooted civilisational radiance beyond its own borders; a ‘normal’ great power on the ascendant again, which has the capacity and right to participate in discussions of topics of global political, economic, cultural and other significance. As such, it should be recognised as having the right to participate in the international community as an equal partner that shares much with Europe and the West, but also has its own valid perspectives borne of its particular experiences; moreover, Russia has the will to defend and promote these beliefs by whatever means necessary, but seeks primarily to do so in concord with partners. The narrative also entails a critique of the US, which is framed as pursuing national interests under the guide of human rights and thereby seeking to contain Russia as during the Cold War. The democratisation agenda of the West, which is framed as assuming *a priori* the inferior standing of political relations in non-Western countries, receives particular criticism. While not denying the universality of certain core values across diverse human communities, the Russian model is posited as preserving the right to culturally specific interpretations thereof in a nation’s internal affairs. This represents, in short, the premises of sovereign democracy as a political doctrine, which although less cited nowadays represents a broad, if diffuse common sense about Russian policy (White, 2008).

## Methodology

The study (n = 436) was conducted in autumn 2011, when Ukrainian society was not convulsed by particular issues likely to affect the debate. With the contours of the discourse having been identified, these consistently recurring positions articulated by the selected Russian soft power agents were formulated into statements for a questionnaire, which respondents had to evaluate on a sliding five-point scale, with a score of five always indicating acquiescence and a very positive, ‘pro-Russian’ response, and a score of one reflecting a conversely rejection of the statement. In order to adjudge the presence of soft power, the score

should be equal to or greater than three; the point at which the average score exceeds 'ambivalent' and enters positive territory. In the focus groups, participants were shown three short (c. five minutes) authentic video clips expressing the target discourse (Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, 2009; Putin 2007; Russkiy Mir Foundation, n.d.), and were encouraged to respond in a free-flowing discussion guided by a native language moderator.

This study focused on evaluating audience reception of one of Russia's soft power approaches – namely the civilisational discourse as it is targeted at all Ukrainians, and not simply ethnic Russians or Russian native speakers. In particular, students at the respective national universities in four cities across the country were targeted: those at Taras Shevchenko University in Kyiv, Ivan-Franko University in L'viv, Donetsk National Technical University and V.N. Karamzin Kharkiv National University. This represents a highly educated section of society, born largely after the end of the USSR (aged c.16–21) and with a relatively high level of access to a diversity of information. While it is not possible to directly extrapolate the views of this specific sample group to the general public as a whole, their negotiations of Russia's soft power discourses are especially significant for scholars of politics as this section of society is likely to become Ukraine's leaders and opinion-formers of the future.

Moreover, a focus on Ukraine necessitates an acknowledgement of the country's regional diversity, which is reflected in language, ethnicity, industry and culture, and results from divergent historical experiences under different European empires prior to the formation of the Ukrainian state during the Soviet period. While focusing on four regions across Ukraine cannot claim to fully express this diversity, this approach aims to capture a cross-section of opinion in terms of the inhabitants' levels of affinity with Russian soft power narratives.

The first case city was Donetsk, a relatively young city Eastern Ukrainian city where ethnic Russians represent around 40 per cent of the population and the Russian language is clearly dominant. Indeed, the wider Donbas region (locus of the current fighting) was not part of an independent Ukrainian state until 1991, having been an industrial heartland during Soviet times. The region retains significant integrated links with Russian business, while cultural tradition and family ties transcend the border.

Second, Kharkiv is also situated in the East of Ukraine and was a hub of Ukrainian culture in the Russian Empire. Russian is the primary language in the urban centres, although Ukrainian is also spoken. According to the 2001 census, 71 per cent of the population of Kharkiv oblast was ethnic Ukrainian.

Third, as the centrally located national capital, Kyiv naturally commands a decisive influence over the country's political direction. Today Kyiv is considered a thoroughly Ukrainian city, and although Russian remains widely spoken, it is not to the exclusion of Ukrainian.

Fourth, a regional centre for Ukrainian Galicia, the western city of L'viv contrasts the more Russia-oriented Eastern regions. Galicia [*Halychyna*] became part of the Soviet Union only in 1939, having been variously under Polish and Austro-Hungarian rule. It is considered the heartland of Ukrainian nationalism, and was the site of fierce partisan resistance to Soviet occupation during the Second World War. Since the fall of communism, the city has (re-)developed significant cultural ties with the countries of *Mittleuropa*. As of 2001, 88 per cent of the population was ethnic Ukrainian and the area is primarily Ukrainophone, although there is also a significant Russian minority (c.9 per cent in 2001).



**Table 1: Summary of focus group participant profiles**

<b>Focus group name</b>	<b>Native language</b>	<b>Ethnic background</b>	<b>Language of FGD</b>
Kyiv 1	Ukrainian speakers	(Mixed – not profiled)	In Ukrainian but with some Russian
Kyiv 2	Russian speakers	(Mixed – not profiled)	In Russian, but with much Ukrainian
L'viv 1	(Mixed – not profiled)	Russian or mixed background	In Ukrainian only
L'viv 2	(Mixed – not profiled)	Galician Ukrainian background	In Ukrainian only
Donets'k 1	(Mixed – not profiled)	(Mixed – not profiled)	In Russian only
Donets'k 2	(Mixed – not profiled)	(Mixed – not profiled)	In Russian only
Kharkiv 1	(Mixed – not profiled)	Russian background	In Russian only
Kharkiv 2	(Mixed – not profiled)	Ukrainian background	In Russian only

There is insufficient scope here to elaborate on the extensive range of 'tools' employed to disseminate these narratives, which are covered elsewhere (Feklyunina, 2008; Kivirähk et al., 2010). However, it is assumed that Russia has more tools of informational leverage in the East, and the social ties, which also serve to reproduce the narrative, are stronger there also.

Survey sampling took into account variables such as sex, size of settlement of origin, academic discipline, although these did not yield a statistically significant impact upon the results. The survey was available on paper and online, in both Russian and Ukrainian. Respondents were solicited in various ways: survey distribution by university teachers in classes, active recruitment of individuals by employed student assistants, and emails from the moderators bearing the links to the online surveys.

The focus group participants (62 in total) were volunteers selected from the pool of survey respondents. Each of the eight focus groups corresponded with the ideal of 6–10 participants (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996, p. 7), and lasted the recommended 1.5–2 hours (Patton, 1990, p. 335, cited in Flick, 2002, p. 113), excluding formalities such as the soliciting of informed consent and debriefing. This approach also allowed the observation of tendencies towards similarity and difference between the differently sampled groups (Morgan, 1988, p. 48, cited in Flick, 2002, pp. 121 and 115; Lunt and Livingstone, 1996, p. 15). Indeed, the focus groups were constructed so as to reveal the widest possible range of views in each city with regard to native language and family ethnic background, as summarised in Table 1.

### **Negotiating Russian soft power narratives: findings from audience reception research in Ukraine**

This section presents the findings of the empirical research and provides insight into the extent and nature of Russian soft power in Ukraine. The research suggests that Russian soft power offerings do exude a certain amount of attraction among the selected section of the Ukrainian audience in Donetsk, Kharkiv and to a lesser extent in Kyiv. Even in L'viv the

**Table 2: Mean Russian soft power scores by city (out of 5)**

City	Overall	Soft power resources		
		Culture	Foreign policy	Values
L'viv	2.83	2.4	2.88	3.21
Kyiv	3.08	2.99	2.95	3.28
Kharkiv	3.32	3.58	3.12	3.31
Donets'k	3.58	3.8	3.5	3.47

Note: A score of 3 or higher was taken to be indicative of the presence of Russian soft power.

value-oriented elements were found to resonate with the audience. However, the potential to capitalise politically on this agenda-setting capacity is limited by the co-existence of a critical discourse on 'what Russia is like', which undermines trust and thereby confidence in Russian leadership. In this regard, among the educated youth, responses to Russian soft power overtures, while certainly regionally differentiated, are by no means as polarised as is often suggested as participants in the ostensibly 'pro-Russian' East articulated the same sceptical discourse as those in the traditionally more nationalist, 'anti-Russian' West (Table 2).

Looking first to the quantitative findings, the overall soft power scores seem to confirm the familiar East–West divide. The scores significantly above the cut-off point of three indicate Russia's positions has soft power in eastern Donetsk and Kharkiv, while the average score of less than three points for L'viv affirms the relative lack of resonance of Russia's positions there. As reflected in the scores' straddling of the cut-off point of three, the situation in Kyiv, while in positive territory, is clearly more contested, which is perhaps also not surprising as the city strives to become a thoroughly Ukrainian capital city. Although the overall score is crucial to a rounded assessment of a polity's attraction and agenda-setting ability, examination of the three strands' scores is also instructive, as attitudes are more polarised with regard to Russia's foreign policy outlook and, especially, cultural self-positioning, than with regard to the social values espoused. Indeed, the low average evaluations suggest respondents in L'viv and Kyiv are less likely to identify with the positions articulated by Russia's cultural diplomacy outlets. By contrast, in Kharkiv and Donetsk, where, according to the 2001 census (State Committee of Statistics of Ukraine, 2001), Russian language is native to approximately 44 and 75 per cent of the regional populations, respectively, it is not surprising that these cultural elements were held in significantly higher esteem. Attitudes towards Russia's key foreign policy positions, which related to Russia's stance on the world stage, rather than regarding Ukraine specifically, evoked a slightly less regionally polarised response. Respondents in Donetsk sympathised to a significantly greater degree with the positions outlined, while L'vivians tended to be most sceptical and responses from Kharkiv and Kyiv range between these poles.

Interestingly, regional differences in audience reaction to the value-oriented statements are not statistically significant; the scores are clustered close together and reflect a positive appraisal of the outlook advanced by the Russian Patriarch. This response was the most

favourable returned by L'vivians, where religion has traditionally played a greater role in society and 51 per cent of respondents there confessed to the Greek Catholic Church, which is lead from Rome but practices Orthodox rites. Conversely, although the legacy of Soviet atheism is stronger in Eastern Ukraine, where a third of my respondents did not profess a religion, one still observes positive evaluations, which may reflect that fact that spirituality in the Russian world is not simply a matter of religion, but also of nationhood, 'even when the individual is not devout' (Davis, 1995, pp. 222–223).

While not overtly political, social values inform worldview and positions articulated – as a number of participants mentioned during the focus groups – in ways that point to a contrast with the outlook of the West. On this basis, one might hypothesise that on the level of values, Ukrainians share a common well of social values with Russians, which could support a case for a sense of common civilisational belonging. The source of that ideational influence may not always be Russian tools of soft power directly, but other agencies that share a fundamental value basis, if not the same political position (e.g. the Kyiv Patriarchate, other denominations), but if the discourse resonates, it can still help set the agenda on the political arena. However, the scores of the separate strands should not be understood in isolation to achieve a balanced appraisal of Russia's soft power as there are a number of factors at play in determining the extent to which a polity might realise its leadership potential.

Indeed, the triangulated approach provides more contextual insight into how we should interpret these quantitative findings. While a vast amount of data was generated during the study, scope exists here to only present a slither thereof. Thus the argument is advanced that while in principle the ideas and positions Russia advocates in the world clearly possess some significant appeal among the target audience in certain regions, the Kremlin's attempts to convert this into a hegemonic rationality of truth and realise its international agenda-setting potential on the political stage are stymied by a lack of credibility and trust in Russian leadership even in regions typically considered 'pro-Russian'. Indeed, in this regard, attitudes among this young, highly educated section of the Ukrainian audience were far less polarised than often suggested to be the case for the population as a whole, with a coherent and consistent negative discourse on 'what Russia is like' emerging across all case regions.

Speaking generally, focus group participants in Kyiv and members of the L'vivian group with a traditionally Galician family background tended to treat the content of the stimulus materials more dismissively and moved quickly to focus on Russia's perceived negative role. By contrast, participants in the Kharkiv and Donetsk groups and the group composed of L'vivians with a Russian family background were more ready to engage with the ideas presented, even if they remained wary of Russia's intentions. In this sense, the qualitative research findings reflect the broad East–West trend of the quantitative results. There is insufficient scope here to reflect fully the nuances between the groups, and in any case, on the basis of a small-scale focus group study – altogether 62 individuals (excluding two pilot groups, which in fact returned similar findings) participated in the focus groups – it is not possible to generalise meaningfully about the overall differences. However, some broad conclusions may be drawn that might help set the agenda for future research.

As suggested by the survey findings, outlooks differed most significantly with regard to the cultural strand, although among this young, educated cohort, only one participant mentioned

a strong identification with the Russian Federation. Otherwise, participants from all regions in principle identified with their Ukrainian citizenship, even if what this meant was much more ambiguous for participants from the East. Those in Kharkiv frequently expressed notions of a liminal 'East Ukrainian' identity; neither Ukrainian in the Galician nationalist sense nor Russian, but somewhere in-between; whereas those in Donetsk were more inclined to express a specifically local Donetsk identity or a diffuse cosmopolitan, transborder sense of belonging. In L'viv, while participants with a Russian background were inclined to feel some sense of being part of a 'Russian world', their sense of Ukrainian identity and being a minority within that country seemed more settled. This would doubtless be aided by their ability to converse fluently in Ukrainian – an issue that was repeatedly pointed to in Donetsk as impeding participants' ability to develop a stronger Ukrainian identity. The Galicians and Kyivans had a greater propensity to reject the notion of belonging to a Russian world, or to see it as something imposed upon them by virtue of history. Overall, although unsurprisingly participants differed with regard to what the *Russkiy* meant to them and their sense of belonging to this civilisational collective, in terms of how they negotiated the value and foreign policy issues the participants' reactions had much more in common. Indeed, the findings suggest that among this audience of educated citizens and potential future leaders there are widespread reservations about Russia's suitability to assume regional leadership, which seem rooted in a prevalent lack of trust in the state's motivations *à propos* Ukraine.

As might be expected from the survey findings, which even in the East reflect a generalised sympathy more than ringing endorsement, some participants in all regions rejected the foreign policy and value narratives advanced by Putin and Patriarch Kirill outright. However, often a sense emerged that the positions advanced were 'objective' and right. Yet even when this was the case, such positive responses to the stimulus materials were most often followed by a qualifying expression (e.g. 'but nevertheless ...' [*vse ravno*]), which inevitably prefaced an enumeration of concerns and reservations. Significantly, the prevalence of such critical narratives was not restricted to the parts of the country perceived as more Western-oriented, but was also frequently heard in the ostensibly more pro-Russian cities of Donetsk and Kharkiv. Five key discursive elements emerged that were common to the discussions across the country: (1) Russian soft power activities as propaganda; (2) the assumption of underlying political intentions; (3) the obtrusiveness of Russian promotional activities; (4) the perception of arrogance; and (5) the lack of credibility of Russia's soft power actors. These critical themes may be seen to reflect the implications of that fact that the nuances of cultural influence under contemporary conditions are not yet adequately appreciated by Russian soft power professionals.

First, all three stimulus clips were readily discussed in terms of 'propaganda', with the groups punctuated by talk of 'zombification', 'brainwashing' and perceived attempts at 'manipulation'. For instance, describing Patriarch Kirill, one participant stated:

This is just full-on brainwashing. Well, for me he is absolutely in line with the party leaders of the Soviet era, with those who sit in the Russian government. It's just a politician. ... Well, ... there really wasn't anything new there. Let's say, I didn't find out today that you can confidently place an equals sign between the church and politics (Ira, Russian background, Kharkiv).

This perception is not surprising given that a political analyst interviewed for this study confidently stated that the Kremlin *did* understand soft power as 'propaganda' and did not consider it anything new. In this view, soft power is restricted to a concern for *imidzh* and

public relations campaigns to put a more appealing spin on Russian realities. This neglects the way that audiences, especially in the information-rich contemporary period, assume an active role in interpreting information by drawing on alternative sources of information and experiences to negotiate the projected narratives, rather than imbibing them as eternal truths. This assumption of the audience as a recipient vessel of information seems not only to reflect a rather simplistic and outmoded approach to international communication, but also an unappealing lack of concern for the individual.

The groups reflected a prevailing lack of trust in the sincerity of Russian words and a sensitivity to the idea that while Russia's representatives may employ 'beautiful words', if one probes more closely less favourable intentions may be discerned:

In principle, [Patriarch Kirill] didn't say anything wrong. ... Nevertheless, there is a particular context to this speech. As was said, you have to read between the lines, and in this case, listen between the words, because at the end of the day, I'd say it's a word game, and between these words you have to look out for something else, something less positive than it appears (Stas, Galician Ukrainian Speaker, L'viv).

Second, and more specifically, the stimulus materials – even those on cultural and spiritual topics – were understood in a context informed by imperialist political intentions on the part of the Russian elite. The nature of such intentions was taken for granted by the participants to the extent that it often remained an unspoken, but inter-subjectively understood assumption. On occasion it became clear that the intention was felt to be one of revanchism; that Russia's has 'reunification' in mind for its relations with Ukraine.

Similarly, commenting on the Russkiy Mir Foundation, another participant noted with scepticism:

An NGO created by Putin' – Yeah, right! Even the name 'Russkiy Mir' alludes to the imperial habits of Russia. Russkiy MIR! (Taras, Galician Ukrainian Speaker, L'viv)

Third, participants repeatedly expressed impressions of the obtrusiveness of Russian cultural and informational activities. One girl mimicked her feelings with shrill intonation:

It's pressed upon you: 'Come along, learn this Russian language! Come along, open a book! Join our group! Drop Ukrainian language! Leave Ukraine, go to Russia, work there! (Masha, Donets'k).

This cultural pressure seems to stem from an assumed asymmetry in power relationships that has been observed in Russian attitudes towards relations with its neighbours. As one interviewee, a political analyst, stated in Moscow with regard to Russia's relations with its former Soviet satellites,

In Russia, it's only possible to be the older brother, horizontal relations are impossible, that is to say, equal relations are impossible, anyway, that's how Russia behaves with others, relations can only be top-down, like with a younger brother.

Indeed, several participants in diverse groups expressed the suspicion that even voluntary activities and events offered by the Russkiy Mir Foundation could in fact be 'voluntary-coercive' [*dobrovolno-prinuzhditelno*]; apparently voluntary, but giving raise to negative effects in case of non-compliance so as to be effectively compulsory.

The fourth key issue concerns the way in which Russia has considered its strength – defined in terms of its military prowess, territorial expanses and global cultural radiance – as the basis of its attraction as a world power. However, Russia’s preponderance of strength, even in the domain of culture usually held up as a virtue of soft power, often actually appeared to be negatively perceived by participants. This was partly due to the asymmetry between Ukrainian and Russian capacity in the area of cultural promotion and the threat this was thus seen to pose, even in the East:

I don’t know, to me personally the idea of improving the quality of knowledge of the Russian language isn’t in itself bad, of course not, but when the quantity of initiatives to enhance this are greater than the quantity of initiatives to improve knowledge of Ukrainian, then it is a bit inappropriate, I think (Aleksey, Russian-speaker, Kyiv).

Indeed, the advancement of Russian culture was also framed in negative terms by the participants, who expressed perceptions of relentless self-promotion, which was at best received as tiresome and at worst as arrogance and chauvinism. Reflecting on the work on the Russkiy Mir Foundation, one student noted,

One sentence immediately came to mind: ‘We’re better than them.’ Look, America is expanding into the whole world, but we’re better. We don’t do it like that, we do it properly – we are quietly propagating our culture, very gently promoting our religion everywhere, we’re doing it all so well that you won’t even notice it (Natasha, Ukrainian speaker, Kyiv 2).

Another similarly observed that Putin expressed ‘necessary things with an accent on the fact that Russia is so good and all the others are so bad’ (Viktor, self-identifying Surzhyk speaker, Kyiv 2).

Fifth, confidence in Russian soft power is further eroded by issues affecting the credibility of its representatives. In spite of support for the values advocated, the story of Patriarch Kirill owning a US\$30,000 Breguet watch, despite admonishing materialism in favour of spiritual values, cropped across the groups, and reinforced the perception of hypocrisy among supposed moral leaders:

The first idea suggests that we renounce consumer culture. But on the other hand, in my opinion, these clergymen in no way renounce it. They buy themselves luxurious things and cars. [The patriarch] certainly didn’t go [to the studio] on foot! (Pyotr, Donets’k)

Indeed, discussions were punctuated by a cynical discourse on the perceived ‘true’ motivations of the Moscow Patriarchate, as Pavel, a Galician Ukrainian speaker, asked rhetorically: ‘Why does the patriarch have such a great regard for Ukraine? It’s explained by the fact that he needs Ukraine as a big money box!’

The audience reception research thus paints a picture that defies the categorisation of Ukraine into diametrically opposed pro-Western and pro-Russian parts when it comes to the attraction and leadership of Russia on the international stage. On the one hand, the traditional, more socially conservative value strand of the civilisation discourse, with its footings in shared Orthodox Christianity resonated across the country, and Russia’s foreign policy perspectives on the world stage, if not regarding Ukraine specifically, have appeal beyond the areas typically seen as ‘pro-Russian’. Yet, on the other hand, it must be of concern to Russia’s soft power professionals that the heavy-handed implementation of public diplomacy initiatives is perceived as an attempt to ‘force Ukraine to friendship’ with Russia by the younger



generation, even in the more sympathetic Eastern regions. The resultant unfavourable, 'common-sense' discourse about Russia detailed above serves to alienate would-be friends rather than attract them, and seems only confirmed by Russia's involvement in the recent conflict and encourages the search for alternatives to the very ties Moscow seeks to strengthen.

As it is not possible to pinpoint in such a small-scale study the relative power of different variables such as family background, degree of exposure to Russian public diplomacy and so on in explaining the prevalence of Russian soft power, this further step must remain the preserve of further enquiry. Future research might also usefully evaluate the extent to which the themes of the critical discourse revealed in the focus groups resonate more broadly among the sample population.

## Conclusion

This study has taken Joseph Nye's high-profile 'soft power' concept, clarified its theoretical contours and applied it methodically to empirically investigate the extent of Russian soft power in contemporary Ukraine. Through extensive in-country fieldwork original datasets were generated that provide contextualised insight into audience responses to the worldview espoused by Russian soft power outlets. The analysis points not only to a miscomprehension of the specifically voluntaristic nature of soft power among the Russian elite, but also demonstrates the tangibly detrimental impact of Moscow's traditional, top-down approach to cultural influence upon the attitudes of educated Ukrainian young people from a diverse cross-section of cities. Indeed, while the quantitative study of the audiences' reception of Russia's civilisational narratives indicates that this worldview enjoys some resonance, the potential to capitalise on this attraction in foreign affairs is impeded by resistance grounded in a coherent counter-narrative of 'what Russia is like' that casts an unfavourable light on Moscow's leadership aspirations. Rather than emerging as a culturally rich and spiritual counter-hegemon crusading for justice on the global stage, by this critical account, Russia is cast as neo-imperial, chauvinist and prone to 'forcing' its neighbours to friendship. Although these issues are to some extent reflective of a longstanding cultural tradition, this is not to say they are timeless, immutable and destined to be unresponsive to change. Political will is, however, required to effect a shift to a more genuinely *soft* power. In the meantime, while Russia may have strengthened its appeal among certain sections of the Ukrainian population, the recent conflict has appeared to confirm many Ukrainians' worst fears of Russian revanchism and served to further alienate them from notions of a 'Russian world'.

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