

Instrumental Factors of Soft Power in an Era of Global Turbulence

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Abstract

The article presents a realist view of soft power. In this interpretation, soft power is a tool that provides advantages in international competition. The main purpose of soft power is to generate motives, meanings, and rules that underlie actions. As a concept and practice, soft power is associated with the idea of globalization and hegemonism. According to the Gramscian interpretation of soft power, it serves primarily the interests of the hegemon but ultimately creates common benefits for a significant part of the international community. However, today we are witnessing the crisis of American hegemony and weariness of the West's soft power. These changes encourage the search for new ways to build a fairer world order. The author argues that to achieve this goal, Russia's soft power should go beyond efforts to improve its international image and protect its sovereignty and

traditional values. This vision of soft power does not elucidate what the future world should be like and what role Russia should play in it.

Keywords: soft power, realism, U.S. hegemony, neo-Gramscianism, cultural policy, public diplomacy, post-Soviet space, traditional values, Russian soft power, Russian foreign policy.

The concept of soft power appeared almost simultaneously with American hegemonism, but with it it has approached an epistemological crisis and now requires rethinking. Proposed by Joseph Nye Jr (1990) at the end of the Cold War, it was an attempt to define new meanings for American politics after the collapse of the main competing ideology, to comprehend the success of the Revolutions of 1989, and to realize what Charles Krauthammer called the “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer, 1990). However, it was not a conceptualization of the non-force dimension of power at that moment. Later Nye often cited the fall of the Berlin Wall as an example. “When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, it didn’t come down under a barrage of artillery. It came down under hammers and bulldozers that were wielded by people whose minds had been changed by exposure to Western culture and broadcasts that had crossed the Iron Curtain. So, if we ignore soft power, we’re ignoring a very important power” (Nye, 2021).

The concept proved to be successful not so much because of its explanatory force, but because of its vagueness, as it could explain a wide range of phenomena. Consequently, the term ‘soft power’ became widely used in politics (Cronin and Lord K., 2010) and, once embedded in the public lexicon, made the concept of soft power even more obscure. To clarify it, Nye subsequently (2003) singled out “meta-soft power” as a nation’s ability to critically evaluate itself (which allegedly contributes to its legitimacy and authority), “smart power” as some result produced by a combination of hard and soft power, and “sharp power” (a term borrowed from Christopher Walker and Jessica

Ludwig (2017)) to distinguish soft power from propaganda. However, eventually the concept became even more obscure.

INTERPRETATIONS OF SOFT POWER

Soft power is usually defined as a form of power without violence and coercion, based on the ability to shape the preferences of others. “A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries—admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness—want to follow it... This soft power—getting others to want the outcomes that you want—coopts people rather than coerces them” (Nye, 2004, p. 5). Essentially, it signifies the distinct modern approach to presenting ideology that is free from rigid opposition of competing concepts and any association with authoritarianism and coercion. The notion of ideology almost always carries too many negative connotations, while the notion of soft power is almost always taken positively. At the same time, soft power has all characteristic features of ideology: a unique picture of the world that rejects what does not fit into it, an imperative character, and a tendency towards universalism. An illustrative example is the propaganda of democracy as the cornerstone of social success, always rejected by all other forms of social organization. Similarly, economic theories, social, political, and legal concepts, international norms, and international organizations’ approaches to settling problems are all soft ways of propagating ideology. Ideological and economic connotations can be clearly seen even in discourse on environmental protection and climate change. In each case, leading actors shape the logic of decisions so that they could be adopted by other countries, including decisions determining the vector of international development. “Soft power thus operates at the level of interests, or motivations, or vital goals and preferences, or strategies for achieving vital goals” (Kearn, 2011, p. 68).

The concept of soft power has always caused a lot of confusion simply because the authors who addressed it had to avoid explicit indication of the imperative and manipulative characteristics of soft power. However, Nye himself never denied them. “If I can get you to want to do what I want, then I do not have to use carrots or sticks to

make you do it” (Nye, 2004, p. 6). At the same time, the borderline between the influence on interests and preferences, and direct manipulation of behavior is practically erased.

Soft power is sometimes viewed as the point where the three main theoretical approaches in the study of international relations intersect (Gallarotti, 2011). However, in most interpretations, this concept is an attempt to expand the analytical field of realism, which allows one to talk about traditional areas of cooperation in terms of power. Soft power is basically a force and must be interpreted as such. In this sense, it is ambivalent, and like any force it can be used not only for consolidation among allies, but also for confrontation. The example of the Berlin Wall, often cited by Nye, is the proof, because the incorporation of the GDR into the Western community was associated with the fall of the regime, the collapse of statehood, and the transformation of spheres of influence and global security. Similarly, we can talk about the offensive nature of the West’s soft power during the Arab Spring and the participation of the same actors in peacekeeping processes across the globe.

The concept of soft power is often associated with neoliberalism just because its founder Joseph Nye was recognized as a liberal even before he started working in this area. Nye explains it by the fact that in the 1970s, when he and his co-author, Robert Owen Keohane, proposed transnationalism as a new approach to treating international relations, states were the only actors taken into account by researchers, force was the main tool, and security was the key goal. The proposed new approach stated that the world had become much more complicated, and the theories that the authors had developed to study it were marked as neoliberalism. Nye himself explains the quintessential nature of his approach as follows: “Start with realism, but don’t stop there” (Nye, 2020). In general, according to Nye himself, he tends to consider himself a liberal realist (Ibid).

Conceptual obscurity and initially erroneous expectations led to an unusual result. Some researchers would like to see soft power as a liberal and perhaps even pacifist approach, opposed to hard power. But because political practice is often a far cry from such expectations,

the concept caused disappointment and was even slammed as useless. However, some realist authors continue to consider the concept viable. They just distance themselves from the most common interpretations of soft power that basically reduce the notion of power to nothing. Specifically, Chinese researcher Mingjiang Li introduced the concept of the ‘soft use of power’ (Li, 2009, p. 9), and his British colleague Gary Rawnsley, following in this vein, “questions the emphasis on cultural approaches to soft power” (Rawnsley, 2012).

Ien Ang, Yudhishtir Raj Isar, and Phillip Mar have proposed a close-to-realist interpretation of soft power but did not say so directly. They argue that “a point that has been missed in most writings on soft power is that cultural attractiveness per se is not soft power on its own. It can be a soft power resource, provided it is deployed to achieve clearly defined policy objectives under a thought-out strategy” (Ang, Isar and Mar, 2015, p. 368). In general, the view of soft power as a realist concept is practically absent in academic discourse, even though such an interpretation would obviously be possible and productive. It is this approach that underlies the novelty of this article.

SOFT POWER: MEANING-MAKING

The presence of key elements of the realist approach—power and interest—seems quite natural in the semantic field of soft power. The concept expands the understanding of the most important realist notions: international solidarity becomes one of the most important criteria of power, and collective and global interests based on universal values acquire a position equal to national interests.

The most important factor in theoretical discussions about soft power is hegemonic discourse. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR, which was increasingly viewed as a bloodless military defeat, the United States quickly came to believe that it was in a unique situation. William Wohlforth said: “The United States is the first leading state in modern international history with decisive preponderance in all the underlying components of power: economic, military, technological, and geopolitical” (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 7). He

claimed that “unipolarity minimizes security competition among the other great powers” (Ibid, p. 7). Many years later, despite international changes that had called in question American leadership, Nye continued to insist on the strength of American primacy and its special nature. In his opinion, expressed in 2016, “American primacy allowed freedom of choice to others and an openness that was not always true of previous forms of hegemony. ... States that have benefited from this liberal world order may preserve its institutional framework—its institutions, norms and commitments—out of self-interest. ...No single country is poised to overtake the United States in overall power” (Nye, 2016). Among other researchers who addressed the issue of soft power in terms of hegemony were Richard Ned Low and Robert Kelly (2001) and David Kern (2011).

In the Gramscian interpretation, the hegemon subordinates the system to its interests, creates institutions, and works to develop norms that serve primarily its own interests but ultimately create benefits for other states, too. The common good and benefits, primarily security and market access, are crucial for understanding why they submit to the hegemon’s leadership (Posen, 2003). In this context, soft power can be understood as a set of ideological and regulatory elements that serve as a drive belt between a leading state and its followers. A sophisticated soft power of the leading actor and a high level of attraction to its culture, ideas, and values significantly reduce the complexity and cost of system management in much the same way as institutional bodies created by the hegemon tie other states to the system of its preferences even tighter. According to Walter Mead, “Economic power can be thought of as sticky power, which comprises a set of economic institutions and policies that attracts others towards U.S. influence and then traps them in it. Together with soft power (the values, ideas, habits, and politics inherent in the system), sharp and sticky power sustain U.S. hegemony and make something as artificial and historically arbitrary as the U.S.-led global system appear desirable, inevitable, and permanent” (Mead, 2009). Soft power is an instrument of dominance, competition, non-violent struggle, and consolidation of allies. If it is true that soft power is more effective in a homogeneous community,

then it will also be correct to say that soft power is a tool for creating such communities.

Modern cultural theory sees culture as inherently relational and communication as a social process of joint meaning-making. This understanding allows us to view these aspects of human activity as the process of finding common approaches in which its participants compete for making common meanings and rules (Zaharna, Arsenal and Fisher, 2013). This is the essence of the efforts to create and use soft power. Importantly, they appear to be more successful in a setting where meanings and rules already exist. David W. Kern names two conditions necessary for producing and using soft power: “a rule-governed institutional setting and the presence of underlying mutual interests are crucial to understanding where soft power is likely to be accrued and utilized” (Kern, 2011, p. 72). According to this logic, soft power can have influence only in supranational communities and integration associations that are united by common values and norms, such as the EU, or even in communities that are loose but still close in terms of norms and values, such as the collective West, and in bigger models of global politics where the “applicability of soft power becomes more difficult to discern” (Ibid, p. 72).

This conclusion will be incorrect if common organizations, institutions, theories, and practices that remain active even during international crises are viewed as a product of meanings developed in fierce competition. There are also certain exceptions that challenge this logic. For instance, Soviet Communist ideology can be regarded as a very successful example of soft power, which created global social gravity and won over numerous supporters around the world, despite the incomplete recognition of the country before 1934 and the Iron Curtain after World War II. The Soviet Union’s soft power was inherently competitive and associated with the creation of new rules and incentives for development and national leadership in the world, even though communication and information were far less available in those years than today. Similarly, the West’s soft power greatly influenced socialist countries, deftly bypassing the obstacles set to block access to information, and ultimately played an important role in the fall of Communism.

This interpretation of soft power can hardly allow one to see it mainly as a tool for creating a positive image of a country although this view is quite common. In recent years, rising world leaders, such as the BRICS countries, have been actively strengthening their international standing to match the growing global economic power (Holden and Tryhorn, 2013). But instead of enhancing soft power by creating common values, rules, and areas of development, they focused on making their countries more attractive and improving their image. This reading of the soft power concept has led to focusing on international cultural activities (Ang, Isar and Mar, 2015, p. 368). However, it is very important to remember that public diplomacy is only one of the tools to create soft power that is not designed to make new meanings, and therefore it is not the most significant instrument.

This is why it would be more appropriate to avoid associating such attempts with soft power and consider them in terms of their impact on the export of goods and services (which was probably the main goal). One example is the K-pop music, which has made modern culture of South Korea known and popular in many societies. Yet this is important for the country's image but does not affect the policy of international actors. In this and other similar cases, cultural ties have been based on the primacy of the national factor and developed as a one-way street. In contrast to this approach, Nye argued that "the most effective public diplomacy is a two-way street that involves listening as well as talking" (Nye, 2019, p. 13). Attractiveness is directly related to ideas and values rooted in consciousness and practice. This is why the objectives of soft power and public diplomacy should not be reduced to cultural attractiveness.

Ian Hall and Frank Smith, citing public opinion surveys, argue that a surge in initiatives concerning soft power (understood this way) in East Asia has had little or no positive impact on international public opinion, despite huge investments made in them. Moreover, attention to soft power has spurred cultural competition between countries. They also argue that the intensifying competition for soft power in Asia can increase rather than ease tension in the region (Hall and Smith, 2013). These examples often cause frustration with the concept of soft power.

In Russia, soft power is also traditionally associated with cultural attractiveness and a positive image of the country. For many years, these efforts have focused on historical and ethnographic aspects and have been separated from the national and global development agendas, as well as from foreign policy tasks. The dissemination of knowledge about Russian culture and the strengthening of positive attitudes in the world can be considered an important part of public diplomacy, but it would be premature to say that “attractiveness” destroys barriers, promotes contacts, and can be converted into influence.

IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL TRANSFORMATION

Amid the mounting international crisis, soft power is increasingly seen as acting beyond standard scenarios and reflecting the need to rethink previous rules and norms. But this can only be possible if it outlines the future and answers fundamental questions of our time—social, economic, and political. The current systemic crisis manifests itself in many ways, including the end of consensus among the great powers and their ability to control global and regional processes, the declining role of international organizations and international law, the exhaustion of the existing model of capitalism, and the impressive scale of sanctions wars. The changes affect almost all areas from the economy and security to the increasingly paradoxical interpretations of what a human is and the purpose of his existence (Putin, 2021). All these changes require a revision of familiar concepts and approaches. As a weary hegemon, the United States is no longer able to create the common good, rules and order, while its attempt to reset its hegemony is destroying the international system. The weakening hegemon forces the world to choose between accepting a new edition of its leadership and chaos.

Soft power is a globalist phenomenon not only because it contains the hegemonic component, but also because it is associated with promotion of universal rules and global solutions. This implies a set of relationships that constitute a multilateral institutional system designed to collectively solve common problems.

The concepts of ‘grand challenges’ and ‘global challenges’ became widespread relatively recently, in the early 2000s, in the study of

environmental, energy, and water supply problems and subsequently served as a guideline for political action. The evolution of academic problems and hypotheses into the political and socio-economic agenda involved problems of climate change and the spread of the coronavirus infection. Soft power solutions were often included in very broad contexts, although they are just instruments designed to increase national competitiveness. So it neither implied equal participation of all actors in devising a global agenda, nor equitable distribution of benefits.

Attempts to reduce carbon dioxide emissions were prompted by climate protectionism and plans to reindustrialize developed countries by using the most advanced technologies. The fight against the spread of coronavirus infection boosted economic digitalization, globalization of new-generation high-tech companies, and the emergence of new forms of social control. Global problems of this kind are called wicked problems. In many studies (Head et al., 2008; Edgeman, 2015; Peters, 2017), this notion is used to define “complex, intractable, open-ended” problems that fit into different contexts and are characterized by the ambiguity of our knowledge about them and of the values at stake (Hoppe, 2011). In other words, soft power is directly related to the language that describes global problems, problem discourse, and collective solutions.

Soft power is organically linked to innovation, which is why strategies for solving global problems are proposed not only by states but also by non-state actors. In the last few decades, the world stage has become more crowded, with various non-state actors operating both locally and globally, interacting with each other horizontally through transnational communication networks, and often having goals and objectives that overlap or defy those set by national governments.

Multinational companies are increasingly performing global missions. For example, Phillips has announced an ambitious plan to improve the lives of three billion people each year until 2025; Shell supports local projects to provide communities with access to energy, such as hydro and solar power in the Philippines; Unilever is committed to making sustainable life commonplace; Monsanto

is set to mitigate the global problem of sustainability; and Siemens claims to have solutions to the challenges of global population growth, urbanization, climate change, and resource conservation. Multinational companies are not only the creators, but also the beneficiaries of soft power manifested in the way the global economic model and general rules work. Multinational companies not only seek to strengthen their own position in the global market, but also the position of the countries where their businesses and regulation institutions are located. In other words, they work jointly with the countries that basically write the rules of international business and trade and can protect their interests.

TRADITIONS VS. MODERNIZATION

Since the interpretation of soft power as the ability to control the behavior of others without bribery and coercion may be insufficient, an expanded definition should be given. Soft power is a method of management by identifying problems, controlling the relevant discourse, and devising rules and decisions for all parties involved.

Although Russia has a limited set of soft power tools, it is one of the few countries that can offer a new global agenda. The very possibility of such an agenda can be doubtful if we agree that there is deglobalization underway and the fabric of international society is falling apart. However, except for the current artificially designed crisis of international communication, there is nothing to indicate that agendas are geographically localized. International trade keeps growing and, although diplomatic contacts have been curtailed and economic relations with Western countries restricted, Russia cannot be excluded from the solution of major international problems, such as climate change and environmental protection, international transit, food security, global energy, and strategic security. However, the potential of soft power is associated not only with devising new rules and decisions in these areas, but also with building a just world order.

The Russian leadership views the future world as a community of sovereign states. However, with globalization underway, it is difficult to talk in earnest about sovereignty as in recent decades it has been subjected to reasonable, although often excessive, criticism, with some

going as far as claiming that sovereignty will soon be a thing of the past. Political practice shows that only a few countries enjoy genuine sovereignty; moreover, many countries prefer to sell part of their independence for inclusion into the global system, following the rules created by its dominant actors.

The priority of sovereignty and traditional values proclaimed in Russia (see Concept, 2023) cannot provide a sound alternative to the well-defined vision of the future and progress. In terms of soft power, this means that it is very difficult to present the declared values outside the country as a guide for action or a tool for drawing a clear picture of the future world. Moreover, none of the successfully implemented modernization projects in human history has relied on traditional values. On the contrary, these projects decisively broke with tradition. Two intensive modernizations in Russian history—Peter the Great's reforms and the socialist modernization in the Soviet Union—were accompanied by an explosive growth of Russia's soft power and influence in the world. Similarly, in Japan during the Meiji period and in Atatürk's Turkey, modernization leaps were made through a departure from tradition (albeit painful in both cases).

Identifying traditional values has always been a problem in multi-confessional and multi-ethnic Russia, which is why they were described in official documents with much delay and in a most general way (Decree, 2022). Life, civic consciousness, patriotism, high moral ideals—only some of these notions can be considered values if understood as beliefs that make a person act in a certain way. But an even greater problem is that they are of an extremely general nature and lack substantive content, which does not permit their universal regulatory use.

Russia's references to traditional values are generally perceived as some version of conservatism based on religion and tradition. This has won approval of some Western conservative politicians and certain understanding in Western societies. As for non-Western countries, most of them have no fighting-for-tradition narrative simply because tradition is naturally embedded in their contemporary life. So the traditionalist agenda can hardly be relevant globally.

Russia's natural desire to preserve its uniqueness requires not so much an appeal to tradition as going beyond the narratives formed within the Western tradition and a new interpretation of basic universal human principles and ideas. The current global challenges call for rethinking the notions of freedom, equality, human rights, the relationship between the individual and the state, as well as the principles of a just world order. Revisiting approaches has been common practice throughout human history as it allowed society to adapt to changes. Regrettably, a new global paradigm is again being formed in the West on the basis of economic and legal theories designed to preserve the dominance of the West and keep the Rest lagging behind. Although the balance of power in the world has changed, the redistribution of benefits in favor of rising and developing countries that have long been deprived of them (Kremlin.ru, 2021) is floundering. Obviously, acting in a system of rules tailored to the interests of a select group of countries, other actors in international relations find it very difficult to defend their interests, let alone take leading positions. For addressing this problem, intellectual sovereignty is more important than the political one.

As the Russian approach to international problems is still largely based on Western narratives, it has no new solutions and cannot be conceptually sound. This particularly concerns the anti-hegemonic message that has been advanced by Russian diplomacy over the last 15 years since Vladimir Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference. Indeed, U.S. hegemony, supported in the past by a considerable part of the international community, has never been democratic and hence has often been justly criticized. Yet this was made up for by common benefits that were created within the rules-based "club" system.

As an alternative to the crumbling hegemony, Russia proposes the concept of multipolarity that only outlines the format of relations between major powers. It does not offer a clear picture of each country's place in the international community, prospects for development or mechanisms for coordinating interests; rather it suggests solving pressing issues through multilateral dialogue. In other words, Russia proposes nothing concrete but a way of devising solutions. According

to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, “an equal and democratic international order should not be based on the balance of brute force but on the interaction of interests, development models, cultures, and traditions” (Lavrov, 2020). What Russian diplomacy presents as a striving for equality and democratic principles in international relations is, in fact, conceptual parochialism. The new anti-neocolonial agenda proposed by Russia as part of its discourse has a significant potential, but it has yet to be elaborated. This requires a new vision of future relations between leading countries and the states that seek to catch up with them, as well as practical solutions to key problems of the Third World.

In addition to the global dimension of soft power, there is also the local historical and geographical dimension that rests on the unique ties between states determined by their neighborhood, common past, language, migration, etc. Post-Soviet countries are a unique domain for Russia to apply its soft power. As an alternative to the “global International,” Vladislav Sutyrin proposes a “thousand threads” model based on the development of existing ties inherited from the past (Sutyrin, 2016). However, traditional tools of soft power are not sufficient in the absence of new relevant meanings: the struggle for common memory as a manifestation of Russian soft power still prevails over the desire to build a common future in the post-Soviet space. No wonder appeals to common memory, especially to that of World War II, often cause rejection in the post-Soviet countries. Meanwhile, existing modernization meanings, which were meant to form the basis of Eurasian integration, can win loyalty of other societies. At this point, these meanings do not make up a common system, clearly lack substance, and are largely obscure to post-Soviet societies. In addition, the post-Soviet countries are facing other “wicked problems” that require urgent solution. These are overpopulation, migration flows, water shortage, lack of human capital, limited access to the newest technologies, etc. Today the pervasive need of the post-Soviet countries is the same as centuries ago—external sources of modernization. Although the leaders of the EAEU countries understand that they will not be able to solve

development problem on their own, they do not yet view their future through the lens of relations with Russia.

Diversification of Russian policy could be an adequate solution, as it would make soft power a line of activity of various modernization agents, both public and private. However, to change approaches, Russia should, above all, answer the most important questions: What is the content of its own national interest and of a matching future world? Without that, it is impossible to formulate rules, norms, or meanings either at the regional or global level.

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