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Russia's Niche Soft Power: Sources, Targets, and Channels of Influence

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Marlène LARUELLE

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- *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East West*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021.
- *Memory Politics and the Russian Civil War. Reds versus Whites*, London: Bloomsbury, 2020, co-authored with Margarita Karnysheva.

Abstract

This paper argues that Russia's soft power should be understood as a *niche soft power*, microtargeting some specific audiences based on four particularisms:

- Russia's history and culture;
- its Soviet legacy;
- its conservative and illiberal political identity today;
- its status as a joker on the international scene.

This strategy emerged as the product of Russia's awareness of its limited outreach capacity compared to the US soft power, both financially and in terms of cultural and brand production to export worldwide. Russia's case allows us to study the scope for a non-universalistic soft power on the international scene, and Moscow's successes and failures at promoting conservative values as well as rebellion against the so-called liberal world order.

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Introduction

Theories of soft power inspired by Joseph Nye dominantly rely on two key assumptions: first, that soft power exists mostly for countries displaying liberal systems and universalistic values; second, that the United States is the yardstick for measuring its impact.[1] These two assumptions are problematic. With exceptions,[2] the literature has so far understudied the potential soft power of non-liberal regimes and the attraction that would be exerted by countries refusing universalistic values and calling for policies based on particularism. Moreover, while the United States is unique in the sheer scale of the soft power it exerts around the world, this makes it more the exception than the yardstick. Looking through a US-centric lens may obscure the niche forms of soft power that other countries project.

This paper argues that Russia's case challenges both of the above assumptions. The country deploys what one may call a *niche soft power*, microtargeting some specific audiences based on Russia's culture, history, and status today. This strategy has emerged as the product of Russia's awareness of its limited outreach capacity compared to US soft power, both financially and in terms of cultural and brand production to export worldwide. Thus, it is based on a smart "SWOT" analysis of the country's strengths and weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. It also reflects the decentralized nature of the country's soft power, with a multitude of non-state actors involved, to different degrees, in promoting Russia abroad, having sometimes thin level of interaction and coordination with state structures.

This feature confirms the existence of a Russian soft power, i.e. a resource that results from the combination of classic public diplomacy conducted by state actors, as well as "new" public diplomacy conducted by non-governmental organizations (in Russia they are closely intertwined to state institutions and function as para-governmental actors), foundations, ideological entrepreneurs, oligarchs, and celebrities, promoting the country's image abroad and communicating with foreign publics. This paper uses a broader definition of soft power that merges both state efforts and non-state

1. J. S. Nye Jr, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs, 2005.
2. V. C. Keating and K. Kaczmarska, "Conservative Soft Power: Liberal Soft Power Bias and the 'Hidden' Attraction of Russia", *Journal of International Relations and Development* 22, No. 1, 2019, pp. 1-27. See also M. Barr and V. Feklyunina (eds.), "Special Issue: The Soft Power of Hard States", *Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 3-4, 2015.

actors' in building, not necessarily in a coordinated way, a positive image of Russia.

Russia's niche strategy confirms the possibility of a non-universalistic soft power. In this niche soft power, what is the role of the conservative values that the Russian state has been officially promoting for almost a decade now? The Putin regime has made conservatism the cornerstone of its strategic narrative:[3] it is commonsensical at home because it embodies both the lived experience of many Russian citizens who call for post-Soviet socioeconomic and cultural transformations to slow down, and the disappointment of Russian elites with the liberal West, and it gives Russia a voice on the international scene that can be heard by both supporters and critics of conservatism.

The meaning of this conservatism remains blurry not only by default but by design: Russian policy actors have aptly integrated the notion of a post-Cold-War world that is fluid both ideologically and in terms of strategic alliances. Yet, even if blurry, this conservatism still keeps an ideological core, a global vision that can then be operationalized under different labels: moral conservatism of so-called traditional values against cultural liberalism promoting gender equality, LGBT+ rights, and the gender change issues, or sovereignism of nation-states against the liberal, multilateral world order.

This paper first discusses the role and place of conservatism in the Russian domestic political landscape, before looking at Russia's four niche soft powers: Russia's history and culture; its Soviet legacy; its political identity today; and its status as a joker on the international scene. It then looks at the successes and failures of the conservative niche soft power, and its ability to attract foreign audiences and influence decisions in favor of Russia on the international scene.

3. On the concept of strategic narratives, see A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin and L. Roselle (eds.), *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017. On Russia's conservatism, read, among others, E. Chebankova, "Russian Fundamental Conservatism: In Search of Modernity", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 2013, pp. 287-313; K. Bluhm and M. Varga (eds.), *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe*, New York: Routledge, 2018; M. Suslov, and D. Uzlaner (eds.), *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes and Dangers,* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019; P. Robinson, "Russia's Emergence as an International Conservative Power", *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 1, 2020.

The role and place of "conservatism" in Russia's political landscape

Conservatism was a dominant component of Russian society in the 1990s, at that time embodied by popular support for the two political parties opposing the Yeltsinian liberal course: Zyuganov's Communist Party, and Vladimir Zhirinovsky's poorly named Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). It was gradually reconquered by more centrist political elites, first in the late 1990s by Unity, the party of Yevgenii Primakov and Yury Luzhkov, and then by the newly created presidential party United Russia.[4]

In the early 2000s, conservatism became United Russia's official ideology, represented by different internal discussion clubs with divergent ideological views, such as "liberal conservative" and "patriotic conservative".[5] It was only in 2008 that the term entered presidential speeches when Dmitry Medvedev refused to define himself as either a liberal or a conservative.[6] The term reappeared in 2012 when Medvedev, still president, defined United Russia's position as "conservative-centrist" and Aleksey Kudrin, for long Finance Minister, as a "right-conservative" (*pravokonservativnyi*) figure.[7]

Beginning in 2013, Vladimir Putin—back to the presidency—used the term in a more political philosophical sense, describing himself as "a pragmatic with a conservative leaning" (*uklon*),[8] advancing a "conservative approach" (*podkhod*),[9] and being "a man with

4. M. Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia*, New York: Springer, 2009.
5. C. Fauconnier, *Entre le marteau et l'enclume : La fabrication d'une hégémonie partisane dans la Russie de Poutine*, Paris: Septentrion, 2019. See also M. Laruelle, "Inside and Around the Kremlin's Black Box: The New Nationalist Think Tanks in Russia", *Stockholm Paper*, 2009.
6. "Interv'iu predstaviteliam sredstv massovoj informatsii stran 'Gruppy vos'mi'" [Interviews with G8 media representatives], Official Website of the President of Russia, 3 July 2008, http://kremlin.ru and "Interv'iu informatsionnomu agenstsvu Reiter" [Interview with Reuters news agency], Official Website of the President of Russia, 25 July 2008, http://kremlin.ru.
7. "Interv'iu gazete Financial Times" [Interview with the Financial Times], Official Website of the President of Russia, 20 June 2011, http://kremlin.ru.
8. "Interv'iu Pervomu kanalu i agenstvu Associated Press" [Interview with Pervyj Kanal and the Associated Press], Official Website of the President of Russia, 4 December 2013, http://kremlin.ru.
9. "Press-konferentsiia Vladimira Putina" [Press Conference of Vladimir Putin], Official Website of the President of Russia, 19 December 2013, http://kremlin.ru.

conservative values" (*tsennosti*).[10] However, after the turning-point year of 2014, Putin mentioned "conservative" only twice in 2016 (nothing in 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020) to define United Russia's posture and to acknowledge the existence of both a liberal and conservative reading of the 1917 Revolutions.[11]

As we see from that brief content analysis, the term "conservatism" has not been widely used at the presidential level, except in 2013–2014. Other notions within the same semantic field have been much more widespread in presidential speeches: spirituality (*dukhovnost'*); national traditions (*natsional'nye traditsii*); authentic roots (*iskonnye korni*); moral values (*moral'nye* and then *nravstvennye tsennosti*); cultural code (*kul'turnyi kod*); moral compass or rods (*moral'nye sterzhni*); spiritual staples (*dukhovnye skrepy*); cultural sovereignty (*kul'turnyi suverenitet*); and, above all, traditional values (*traditsionnye tsennosti*).

The notion of Russian conservatism gradually elaborated by the Kremlin is mostly built as a *counter-experience* to the liberalism experimented with in the 1990s. The memory of the Yeltsinian decade has been erected as the tip of the negative pantheon of what Russia should avoid again.[12] Since the second half of the 2000s—epitomized by Putin's Munich summit speech in 2007[13]—the domestic experience of a liberal shock therapy under Yeltsin has been associated with the so-called liberal world order, which ranks Russia at best as a second-rank power, at worst as a rogue state on a par with Iran and North Korea. To fight against domestic liberal opposition as well as against what is perceived—rightly or wrongly—as the West's "regime change" policy, the Kremlin structured the notion of *Russia's conservatism* as the reverse mirror of the *West's liberalism*.

This stress on a language of conservatism was a product of Vyacheslav Volodin's role as Chief-of-Staff of the Presidential administration from late 2011 (during the massive Bolotnaya anti-Putin protests[14]) to 2016. Before him, Vladislav Surkov, serving in the same position for a decade, supported and funded a broader diversity of ideological products, going from the famous "sovereign democracy"

10. "Vstrecha s aktivom partii 'Edinaia Rossiia'" [Meeting with United Russia party members], Official Website of the President of Russia, 27 April 2012, http://kremlin.ru.
11. "Bol'shaia press-konferentsiia Vladimira Putina" [Vladimir Putin's big press conference], Official Website of the President of Russia, 23 December 2016, http://kremlin.ru.
12. O. Malinova, "Framing the Collective Memory of the 1990s as a Legitimation Tool for Putin's Regime", *Problems of Post-Communism*, June 2020.
13. F. Lukyanov, "Putin's Russia: The Quest for a New Place", *Social Research,* Vol. 76, No. 1, 2009, pp. 117-150.
14. S. A. Greene, *Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014.

to the revival of "Eurasia" and the institutionalization of the "Russian world", and sponsoring both liberal and nationalist lobbying groups.[15]

Since late 2016, with the arrival of Sergey Kirienko in the above position, the shift to a more pragmatic and less ideologically colored narrative has confirmed the ability of the Presidential administration to activate or turn down ideological production. This slowing-down at the Kremlin does not mean that the ideological production at the different layers of public administration follows the same patterns: ministries as well as regional and municipal bodies continue to display a large array of ideological production, in quite a decentralized way.[16] Moreover, some ideological entrepreneurs such as Konstantin Malofeev or Evgenii Prigozhine are trying to consolidate their status on the domestic political landscape by capturing what remains of the Rodina party to present it as a rightist and nationalist alternative to the centrist United Russia.[17]

The new amendments to the constitution approved by popular referendum in July 2020 have strengthened a form of state ideology organized around three key pillars: religion, patriotism, and nationalism. This trinity seems reminiscent of the official doctrine of the Russian Empire under Nicholas I (1825–1855): Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality.[18] As far as religion is concerned, the new amendments mention God ("safeguarding the memory of forefathers who passed on their ideals and faith in God"), allow only opposite-sex marriages, and insist on family values. As for patriotism, the amendments strengthen the patriotic education of children, the memory of the Great Patriotic War (Russia "cherishes the memory of the defenders of the Fatherland and secures the defense of historical truth") and recognize Russia as the legal heir of the Soviet Union. And with respect to nationalism, the amendments evoke the "Russian language as the language of the state-constitutive people, part of the multinational union of equal peoples of the Russian Federation".[19]

However, unlike under Nicholas I, this ideological trinity constitutes anything but a rigid doctrine; its formulation itself remains evasive and deliberately ambiguous. For example, God is now mentioned in the constitution, but the Russian Orthodox Church is

15. P. Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*: *The Surreal Heart of the New* Russia, New York: Public Affairs, 2015.
16. M. Laruelle, "Putin's Regime and the Ideological Market: A Difficult Balancing Game", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Task Force White Paper*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2017.
17. See T. Stanovaya, *R-Politics, The Bulletin of Russian Politics* No. 21 (61), 10 November 2020, pp. 19-24.
18. N. V. Riasanovsky, "'Nationality' in the State Ideology during the Reign of Nicholas I, *Russian Review*, 1960, pp. 38-46.
19. E. Antonova and Iu. Starostina, "Putin vnes popravki pro boga, russkij narod i soiuz muzhchiny i zhenshchiny" [Putin introduced amendments about God, the Russian people and the union of a man and a woman], *RBC*, 2 March 2020, www.rbc.ru.

not recognized as a state religion. The secularity of the state is not denied either, as the amendment relates to the "memory of forefathers", not to today's state institutions: the religiosity of the society does not contradict the secularity of the state. As for the Russian language, it is cited as a euphemism for the notion of the "Russian people" (*russkii narod*), which generates a lot of polemics in the ethnic republics. Evoking the Russian people ethnically would also legally be difficult to defend, as Russia is a federation with clearly identified minorities but an implicit majority, and the state has systematically played with ambiguities in defining the "state-forming" nation.[20]

One may thus notice the plasticity of the formulations used. The regime likes to position itself as a moderate force: it supports an agenda of conservative values but refuses radical formulations that would empower the Church or nationalist forces too much. It also tries to avoid, as much as possible, anything that would be legally binding on divisive topics—religion and nationalism—and it agrees on those for which the consensus is already secure: patriotism, World War II narratives, and the outlawing of homosexuality.

The state bodies' broad and cacophonic ideological production can be explained by the existence of different ecosystems, each formed by a specific realm of institutions, funders and patrons, identifiable symbolic references, ideological entrepreneurs, and media platforms in permanent motion. This diversity gave birth to several "declensions" of the conservatism theme: a religious, a civilizational, an isolationist, and a statist one, depending on which element is considered the cornerstone of Russia's identity—Orthodoxy, Eurasia, the Russian nation, or the state itself.[21]

As we can see, at home the use of the term "conservatism" to define the regime and/or Russia itself covers different semantic spaces. First, conservatism is a synonym of *centrism*, a term used to define the government position, opposing both supposed extremisms—liberalism and communism/nationalism—while continuing neoliberal economic reforms. Second, in relation to its opponents, conservatism acts as a synonym of *counter-revolution* to oppose "color revolutions" and send the message that any form of political changes happening by the pressures of liberal protesters and/or external interference will be vehemently fought against. Third, in relation to public opinion, conservatism is a synonym of *stability*—and predictability—as a key value for Russian public opinion after the too-abrupt changes of the 1990s.

20. O. Shevel, "Russian Nation-Building from Yelt'sin to Medvedev: Ethnic, Civic or Purposefully Ambiguous?", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 63, No. 2,2011, pp. 179–202.
21. P. Robinson, *Russian Conservatism*, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2019.

By using the notion of conservatism, the Kremlin hopes also to present the Putin regime as an achievement for the country, both in terms of reconquering its great-power status as well as in terms of standards of living for citizens. As formulated by Sergey Prozorov, for proponents of conservatism, "post-communist Russia ... has already generated enough that is worth conserving".[22] The overlap between an official ideology protecting the regime from external pressures and the negative memory of the 1990s shared by a majority of Russian citizens explained the wide popular support for Putin for two decades. But this honeymoon has been progressively shaken with new generations and urban middle classes gradually associating the celebrated stability with stagnation and immobilism.[23]

On the international scene, crafting Russia's conservatism as the answer to the West's liberalism is rooted in older ideological antagonisms. This rebellious aspect of Russia's ideological export is nothing new: Russia has been exporting revolutionary ideologies to Europe since the 19th century, from populism and leftist terrorism to communism—as a way to challenge what was seen as Europe's ideological mainstream of the moment. Obviously, what Russia offers today in terms of ideology is incommensurably less structured doctrinally than communism, but it is better adapted to today's postmodern conditions of ideological bricolage and fluidity. It remains based on the central idea that, to exist as an independent power, Russia should offer an ideological alternative—previously socialist, conservative today—to Europe/the West. This alternative takes the form of an outreach strategy centered not on promoting a universalist ideology that could confront directly liberal values associated with the US, but one that is nurtured by Russia's particularisms.

22. S. Prozorov, "Russian Conservatism in the Putin Presidency: The Dispersion of an Hegemonic Discourse", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2005, pp. 121-143, 125.
23. R. Smyth, *Elections, Protest, and Authoritarian Regime Stability: Russia 2008-2020*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Russian soft power toolkit: four niches

As with any great power, Russia offers a full foreign policy toolkit:

- One of the largest diplomatic missions in the world, revived from its ashes of the 1990s.
- A military-industrial complex that has regained part of its influence but still struggles to make itself indispensable to the civilian decision-making process.
- Proactive economic diplomacy, with state corporations, such as Rosatom and Gazprom, and key private actors, such as Rosneft, leading in negotiations abroad.
- A vivid public diplomacy aimed at dialoguing with foreign public opinion and promoting its own interests and values,[24] probably best symbolized by the state-sponsored international media RT and Sputnik.
- A large array of grey strategies, both a legacy of Soviet traditions of "active measures" and a copycat of US marketing and Cold War tactics that gave birth to a dynamic underground world of intelligence services and networks of influence nurtured by different entrepreneurs depending on business leaders linked to the system.[25]

The soft-power potential of this foreign policy toolkit is shaped by Russia's paradoxical status on the international scene. The country is a great power on the decline, representing the "old world"—epitomized by its seat at the UN Security Council and its nuclear arsenal, both inherited from the Soviet Union—and therefore pushing for immobility in order not to challenge what it has earned. At the same time, Russia may appear, in some conditions, as a regional power on the rise, embodying the "new world" of the BRICS, building

24. G. Simons, "Russian Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century: Structure, Means and Message", *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 2014, pp. 440-449; A. Velikaya and Greg Simons (eds.), *Russia's Public Diplomacy: Evolution and Practice*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. See also M. Audinet, "Anatomie de la diplomatie culturelle russe à l'ère postsoviétique", *Hérodote*, Vol. 3, No. 166-167, 2017, pp. 165-177.
25. M. Laruelle and K. Limonier, "Entrepreneurs of Influence: A Digital Exploration Beyond Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare'", forthcoming.

alternatives to the current international institutions.[26] This dual status is replicated in Russia's twofold strategy of isolation and Reconquista—seeing and portraying itself at once as beleaguered fortress *and* a newly triumphant beacon of hope for those disappointed with the US-led world order. This dual strategy aims to buy time to cement Russia's claims to great-power status, or at least to shift the global balance in that direction, with a relatively well-assessed cost-benefit analysis: a low cost for Moscow, but with effective power projection to challenge an already overstretched US that is busy in too many theaters.[27]

Russian soft power is interpreted by Russian decision-makers as a counter-soft power, a reactive and defensive move against the US and European soft power. In a defensive position, Russia has been building soft-power strategies that it sees as having the best cost-benefit ratio: targeting micro-audiences. Microtargeting is a well-known marketing tactic that personalizes advertisement campaigns for each customer based on the collection of demographic, geographic, and psychographic data that predict buying habits, as well as values and interests. With the boom in social media, microtargeting is now the most widespread technique in electoral campaigns as well.[28]

Applied to foreign policy influence, microtargeting means not to try to reach out to a broad, world audience but to speak to some well-identified constituencies whose features predispose them, in theory, to be receptive to Russia's strategic narratives. One can identify four strategies of niche soft power at work: Russia's history and culture; the Soviet legacy; Russia's current governance and ideology; and being the joker on the international scene. The first two are by essence limited to some specific constituencies, while the third and fourth have the potential to reach out to a broader audience, yet without aiming for a universalistic dominance.

26. See for instance S. Budnitsky and L. Jia, "Branding Internet Sovereignty: Digital Media and the Chinese-Russian Cyberalliance", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 21, 2018, pp. 594–613.
27. More in M. Laruelle, "Isolation and Reconquista: Russia's Toolkit as a Constrained Great Power", *Russia Matters*, 12 December 2018, www.russiamatters.org.
28. F. J. Zuiderveen Borgesius, J. Möller, S. Kruikemeier, R. Ó Fathaigh, K. Irion, T. Dobber, B. Bodo, C. de Vreese, "Online Political Microtargeting: Promises and Threats for Democracy", *Utrecht Law Review* , Vol. 14, No. 1, 2018, pp. 82-96.

Niche one: Russian history and culture

The first niche is based on Russian history and culture. It targets, quite naturally, Russian minorities abroad through the idea of shared membership in the "Russian world" (*russkii mir*). Different variants of this approach exist for audiences in what Russia considers its "near abroad" and for those further afield.[29] Those in the "near abroad" can chose between two strategies: the repatriation of compatriots to Russia (900,000 since the launch of the state program in 2006[30]) or staying in their home country and receiving cultural, sometimes political support from Russia.

Those in the "far abroad"—in Europe, North America, and Israel—are targeted differently, as the cultural and everyday bonds to Russia are less obvious. They are invited to reinvest in their Russianness by participating in cultural activities, in supporting Russia's image abroad, and by investing financially in Russia. Rosssotrudnichestvo and, to a lesser extent, the Russian World Foundation, act here as key institutional and financial vectors of this first niche.

A second layer of that first niche is displayed by cultivating fraternal religious sentiment to influence Orthodox countries and communities, particularly in the Balkans, with Greece and Cyprus as central components. In the Middle East, the Russian Orthodox Church has also conducted active paradiplomacy among Eastern Christians, helping the government to frame its geopolitical return in the region into spiritual terms, that of a civilizational mission. The ecclesiastic institution also plays a key role in leveraging influential pro-Russian business and political circles in Lebanon and more globally all the Christian realm sensitive to religious peace in Middle East. As Dmitry Adamsky put it, "the Russian Orthodox Church became a tool of genuine strategic influence" for the Kremlin in and around the Syrian war theater.[31]

29. M. Laruelle, "The 'Russian World': Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination", *Center for Global Interests Papers*, May 2015.
30. A. Lapteva, "Rossiia: programma repatriatsii sootechestvennikov probuksovyvaet", Eurasianet, 10 September 2019, https://russian.eurasianet.org.
31. D. Adamsky, "Christ-loving Diplomats: Russian Ecclesiastical Diplomacy in Syria", *Survival*, Vol. 61, No. 6, 2019, pp. 49-68, here 49. See also Ş. Aktürk, "Five Faces of Russia's Soft Power: Far Left, Far Right, Orthodox Christian, Russophone, and Ethnoreligious Networks", *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 623, November 2019. And also D. Adamsky, "The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow's Syrian Campaign", *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 635, February 2020.

Niche two: soviet legacy

The second niche updates the Soviet legacy. Trying to revive from the ashes Soviet soft power, Moscow has reopened some channels of communication with leftist movements, especially in Western Europe, such as Die Linke in Germany and La France Insoumise in France.[32]

Yet this relationship is a tense one, difficult to operationalize by both sides. The stance of the European left on international affairs indeed shares some ideological components with Russia's position, such as being anti-NATO, cautious toward trans-Atlantic institutions, and reluctant to see an overly neoliberal European Union gain more power over nation-states. However, the Western left is liberal in terms of gender politics, which directly clashes with Russia's moral conservatism, and very militant on environmental issues, something that does not speak to the Kremlin either.

To a lesser extent, some marginal Russian actors have also refurbished the Soviet tradition of supporting secessionist groupuscules promoting African-American, Texan, and Puerto Rican secessionism in the United States, but this remains a minor axis of soft power used mostly by third-rank actors.[33]

Niche three: Russia's governance and ideology

The third niche relates to Russia's ideology today and can be divided into three categories: moral conservatism, illiberal values, and what one may call "sovereignism".

Russia's posturing as the savior of "traditional family values" is indeed now celebrated by all those, in Western countries as well as in the Middle East or Africa, who hope to hamper the promotion of women's rights and sexual minorities. All European and US proponents of the so-called traditional family have been celebrating Putin's stance on the question.[34] The role of Russian actors in international structures such as the World Congress of Families; the channels of communication opened by the Russian Orthodox Church with the Vatican, conservative Catholics, and the US Christian Right

32 L. Győri and P. Krekó, "Don't Ignore the Left! Connections Between Europe's Radical Left and Russia", *Open Democracy*, 13 June 2016, www.opendemocracy.net.

33. That's for instance the case of the Anti-Globalization Movement of Russia (AGD, *Antiglobalistkoe dvizhenie Rossii*) of A. Yonov, which took over that tradition from Vladimir Zhirinovsky's former World Congress of Patriotic Parties (*Vsemirnyi kongress patrioticheskikh partij*).

34. For a list of examples, see C. Keating, "Conservative Soft Power", and M. Laruelle, "Beyond Anti-Westernism: The Kremlin's Narrative about Russia's European Identity and Mission", *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 326, August 2014, www.ponarseurasia.org.

are other good examples of that "moralist International" under Russian leadership.

The rise of illiberal governance—defined as the reduction of public liberties, concentration of power in the hands of a strong charismatic leader, and political encroachment on press and judicial autonomy in countries that had experienced liberalism—which has spread massively, from Turkey and Israel to Brazil and the Philippines, is often presented in the literature as a product of Russia's soft power. But even if local leaders may refer positively to Vladimir Putin as an example and an inspiration, the rise of illiberal governance cannot be interpreted as a direct result of Russia's soft power, but instead should be seen as the product of a homegrown context. The literature on authoritarian/illiberal diffusion still tends indeed to conflate *diffusion* with *convergence*.[35]

That Russia may benefit from a convergence of governance does not automatically mean it has the ability to diffuse its model abroad. However, what it can do is to offer a large portfolio of "services" to illiberal regimes, going from military equipment and advisers, informational support, and offshore mechanisms, to investments in the local economy that defy typical Western cost-benefit analysis.

Challenging the current world order and US dominance is another aspect where Russia's leadership can be celebrated as being at the forefront of "sovereignism".[36] This term, inspired by the French tradition of Gaullism, stresses defending national sovereignty as a key element of both domestic politics and the international order. Moscow advances this sovereignism across three domains: political, economic, and cultural. Political sovereignism asserts that only nation-states command political legitimacy, as this is the only level at which citizens express their will through elections (even if these elections are neither free nor fair), and therefore that powers properly belonging to the nation-state should not be delegated to unelected supranational institutions. It calls for a struggle to restore a Yalta world order that respects great powers' spheres of influence, with the enemies being pan-European bodies, international financial institutions, and international courts, as well as humanitarian interventionism and support by the Western advocacy community for protest-driven regime changes.[37]

35. T. Ambrosio and J. Tolstrup, "How Do We Tell Authoritarian Diffusion From Illusion? Exploring Methodological Issues of Qualitative Research on Authoritarian Diffusion", *Quality & Quantity*, Vol. 53, No. 6, 2019, pp. 2741-2763.
36. See also Jean-Robert Raviot's concept of Pretorianism in J.-R. Raviot, "Le 'poutinisme' : un système prétorien ?", *Russie.NEI.Visions*, No. 106, Ifri, March 2018.
37. R. Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest. The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

In the economic sphere, sovereignism means defending economic patriotism and protectionism against globalization and its ill effects: delocalization of industries and workforces; neoliberal reforms that hollow out welfare provisions; financial capitalism; the dictates of the IMF and World Bank; and so forth. Cultural sovereignism centers on an essentialist definition of the nation—who it includes and what its core cultural features should be. On this view, at the heart of each nation-state is a core nation entitled to promote its culture, while foreigners, migrants, and minorities must accept a second-tier status and recognize the supremacy of the majority.

The three sovereignisms converge in Russia's anti-American and anti-Atlanticist postures, with overlapping implications for European countries, which the Kremlin would like to see turn their back on trans-Atlantic commitments in favor of a continental partnership with Russia. Sovereign European states, according to this outlook, should reject trans-Atlantic associations that merely mask Washington's selfish strategic interests; they should challenge the dominance of the United States and of international financial institutions, and they should renounce multiculturalism and minority rights as Western concepts alien to the majority of the world and at odds with Europe's supposed authentic values.

Niche four: Russia's joker status on the international scene

The fourth niche refers to Russia as a joker or trickster in the international scene and should not be conflated with the "sovereignism" position. The figure of the trickster has been central to Russian and also to Soviet culture, precisely because the latter was a closed society in which people were accustomed to operating in contradictory normative systems.[38] The Russian regime has been able to transfer the popular image of the trickster to a global status in the international scene defined by liminality and transgression; as Vyacheslav Morozov explains, "Russia lacks the capacity to transform the West-dominated international system. Destabilizing it from within is more affordable and addresses their concerns related to both security and status."[39] This joker policy is well encapsulated by RT and Sputnik's emphasis on being an alternative media to the established outlets (referred as "mainstream media"), exalting their

38. M. Lipovetskiy, "Trikster i 'zakrytoe' obshchestvo" [The Trickster and the "closed society"], *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, No. 100, 2009, pp. 224-245.
39. V. Morozov, X. Kurowska, A. Reshetnikov, "Why Russia's Strategic Deception Is Popular: The Cultural Appeal of the Trickster", *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 554, December 2018.

own irony, sarcasm, and sensationalism, with the clearly formulated goal of demystifying the West and its values.[40]

Interpreting this strategy as a simple cynical spoiling of the current world order—accusing Russia of being a "malign" influence is the new fashion among many think tanks in Washington D.C.[41]—would miss the central point that, for a large part of Russian public opinion, including elite public opinion, the idea that liberal democracy is failing to guarantee social order, and that the liberal world order is failing to be equal, fair, and authentically universalistic are genuinely held beliefs.[42] These beliefs are rooted in the lived experience of Russia's socioeconomic transformations since the collapse of the Soviet Union and of the loss of status of the country on the international scene, and in the series of misunderstandings with the West about the terms of the relationship and the co-management of the post-Soviet space.[43]

Centralization vs. decentralization

The coexistence of several niches of soft power microtargeted by Russian actors explains the large variety of ideological tools developed to reach out to different audiences in the world. Illiberal arguments are used to attract far-right and national-populist movements, while anti-US statements and denunciation of the hypocrisy of the neoliberal elites are addressed to a broader and more diverse audience, which includes leftist parties; xenophobic, anti-migrant, and anti-Muslim narratives are produced for European audiences, whereas calls for decolonizing from the West's imperialism are produced for sub-Saharan Africa and the Muslim world.[44]

One of the crucial questions for observers of Russia's soft power is to determine the level of coordination existing between the different niches. Can we talk about a grand design crafted at the Kremlin by Putin's inner circles, or should we see there a sign of the largely decentralized aspect of Russia's microtargeted soft power?

40. K. Limonier and M. Audinet, "La stratégie d'influence informationnelle et numérique de la Russie en Europe", *Hérodote*, Vol. 1, No. 164, 2017, pp. 123-144.
41. See for instance C. Newlin *et al.*, "Countering Russian & Chinese Influence Activities", Center for Strategic & International Studies, July 2020; A. Polyakova, "US Effort to Counter Russian Disinformation and Malign Influence", Brookings, 10 July 2019, www.brookings.edu; "Undermining Democracy: Kremlin Tools of Malign Political Influence", Testimony for the United States House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment, 116th Cong. 1st sess., 2019 (testimony of Michael Carpenter).
42. For the elites, see S. Werning Rivera, "Survey of Russian Elites 20202. New Perspectives on Foreign and Domestic Policy", Hamilton, July 2020, www.hamilton.edu.
43. S. Charap and T. Colton. *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia,* London: Routledge, 2017.
44. F. Douzet, K. Limonier, S. Mihoubi and É. René, "Cartographier la propagation des contenus russes et chinois sur le Web africain francophone", *Hérodote*, Vol. 2, No. 177, 2020, pp. 77-99.

When looking in depth at the mechanisms of Russia's soft power, the second option appears the most plausible, with several concentric circles of institutions and individuals whose function is to reach out to a specific audience and to produce the most efficient narrative to capture support.

While Rossotrudnichestvo and the Russian World Foundation devote the majority of their activities to the near abroad, other institutions such as Natalya Narochniskaya's Institute for Democracy and Cooperation in Paris (closed in 2018) and Vladimir Yakunin's Dialogue of Civilizations in Berlin, were/are devoted to institutional contacts with Western European conservative elites, with a limited success.[45] For RT and Sputnik, the practical autonomy of each national section to develop a narrative adapted to the local context remains to be precisely studied, but appears obvious when one compares discourses for Europe and discourses for Africa and Middle East.[46]

Outside of official public diplomacy, a whole realm of entrepreneurs of influence has grown to develop some of these niches; for instance, the businessman Konstantin Malofeev, well-known for his monarchic and orthodox positions, who has financed parts of the Russian activities in Crimea and Donbas.[47] On the French scene, one may mention Pierre Malinowski, friend of the Le Pen family, who found in Russia the remains of a French general of Napoleon, and succeeded in convincing President Macron to bury him at the Pantheon.[48]

The farther the concentric circles are from Russian political power, the more the figures set in them need to rely on better-positioned individuals who act as intermediaries to shore up support for them among the authorities. In the last circle of influence, we find foreign personalities negotiating the use of their services in their home country, but without direct access to official Russian structures. These foreign personalities are left to speculate about their actual position in Moscow's organigram of influence, and they act as free electrons at their own financial and legal peril.

Each initiative launched by an entrepreneur of influence may fail; in this case, the Russian state structure refuses to bear responsibility for them. We saw some of these tensions between Malofeev's strategies and the Kremlin ones in the management of the

45. A. Barbashin and A. Graef, "Thinking Foreign Policy in Russia: Think Tanks and Grand Narratives", Atlantic Council, 2019.
46. More in F. Douzet *et al.*, "Cartographier la propagation des contenus russes et chinois sur le Web africain francophone", *op. cit.*
47. A. Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*, London: Routledge, 2017.
48. J. Daniel, "De Moscou à Paris, le mystère Malinowski", *Le Monde*, 30 October 2020, www.lemonde.fr.

early months of the Donbas secessionism, when Vladislav Surkov retook control of the insurgency against Malofeev.[49] On the contrary, in the case of success, the influence entrepreneur can be rewarded through official endorsement of his/her initiative

49. S. Hosaka, "Welcome to Surkov's Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War", *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 47, No. 5, 2019, pp. 750-773.

Success and failure of Russia's soft power

How can we measure the success of Russia's soft power globally and of its four niches more specifically? Nye defines soft power as the possibility of reaching goals through attraction rather than coercion and payment. One can therefore identify many layers of soft power's impact, from thin to thick: obtaining concrete decisions favorable to a country without coercion, being granted moral authority to set the agenda on the international scene, and so on.

Depending on how we interpret Russia's soft-power objectives, we can therefore consider it to have succeeded or failed. This paper sees the Russian regime's objectives as more defensive than offensive: Moscow is interested above all in (1) being protected from normative intrusions from the West that would challenge the regime at home, using its soft power as a counter soft power, (2) stopping the shrinking of what remains of Russia's "sphere of influence" in the post-Soviet space, and (3) making the best use of its joker status to destabilize the competitor in its superiority.

The strategy of isolation from international pressures has largely succeeded, not because of Russia's soft power *per se* but thanks to hard-power measures such as refurbishing the Russian military in order to keep nuclear parity with the US, developing new hypersonic weapons, and being active on some war theaters, such as Syria. This hard power has been accompanied by a consistent strategy of becoming more autonomous from Western international institutions: from repaying Russian external debt in the early 2000s to, more recently, developing international payment mechanisms in currencies other than US dollars, creating a national inter-bank transfer[50] system to compete with SWIFT, experimenting with cryptocurrencies,[51] investing in national internet servers located on Russian territory that can operate separately from the Domain Name System used worldwide,

50. N. Turak, "Russia's Central Bank Governor Touts Moscow Alternative to Swift Transfer System as Protection From US Sanctions", *CNBC*, 23 May 2018, www.cnbc.com.
51. S. O'Neal, "From Russia to Macedonia: How Cryptocurrencies Are Regulated in Eastern Europe", *Cointelegraph,* 2 July 2018, https://cointelegraph.com.

phasing out Western software such as Microsoft in favor of Russian alternatives to regain "internet sovereignty", and so on.[52]

On decisions that Russia does not control directly, its ability to make others do what it wants without coercion has shown mixed results. Moscow succeeded in gaining some political rewards from its backing of illiberal parties in Europe; the latter support Russia's international positions and have been consistently pro-Russia in their voting in the European Parliament, trying to challenge or at least slow down critical statements about (and sanctions against) Moscow.[53] Yet, their ability to change a mainstream that is critical of Russia is reduced; the sanctions are still in place, and were even intensified in response to the Navalny poisoning.[54] Similarly, in the US, Donald Trump's personal sympathy for Vladimir Putin as an illiberal leader—and the increase in positive attitudes toward Russia among Republicans during his mandate[55]—had no impact on US foreign policy globally, and the US Congress has never been as unified in its anti-Russian position.[56]

Over the four niches microtargeted by Russian soft power, the results are uneven. The activation of Russian diasporas abroad in support of Russia had mixed results depending on the country and the community. If some symbolic gestures promoting Russia's cultural past have been visible in Western countries, such as organizing Immortal Regiments on Victory Day,[57] the majority of Russians living abroad do not feel particularly dutiful toward Moscow and not necessarily sensitive to a conservative agenda, especially in its religious aspects. The Orthodox solidarity card has more visibly borne some geopolitical fruit for Moscow in the Balkans and the Near East. Reactivating the Soviet past has allowed some reconnections with leftist parties in Europe and countries with an explicit anti-US agenda such as Venezuela, but they are not powerful enough to have weight on the domestic or international scene and to change the mainstream critical view of Russia.

52. Filip Brokeš, "Russia's Sovereign Internet", *Obserwator finansowy.pl,* 24 September 2018, https://financialobserver.eu.
53. P. Krekó, M. Macaulay, C. Molnár and L. Győri, "Europe's New Pro-Putin Coalition: The Parties of 'No'", Institute of Modern Russia, 3 August 2015, https://imrussia.org.
54. "Navalny Novichok Poisoning: EU Sanctions Hit Top Russians", *BBC,* 15 October 2020, www.bbc.com.
55. R. Reinhart, "Republicans More Positive on U.S. Relations With Russia", *Gallup,* 13 July 2018, https://news.gallup.com.
56. I. Kurilla, "The Anti-Russia Surge in U.S. Politics: Finding Context", *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 526, April 2018; A. Polyakova and F. Letsas, "On the Record: The U.S. Administration's Actions on Russia", Brookings, 31 December 2019, www.brookings.edu.
57. See for instance L. Balabay, "'Immortal Regiment' Received Official Status in the United States", *ForumDaily,* 26 September 2019, www.forumdaily.com.

Yet it is in the third and fourth niches that the successes have been the most noticeable. Moral conservatism now constitutes a solid pillar of Russia's soft power to speak to conservative audiences in the West as well as a broad range of countries in the Middle East and Africa. Nonetheless, it remains by definition limited to a pool of social groups already convinced by the so-called "traditional values" agenda. Illiberal governance and "sovereignism" have been transforming the international order over the last few years, with countries like Turkey "earthshaking" the Western order perhaps even more than Russia itself. But this rise of illiberal governance and "sovereignism" is not a product of Russia's soft power; it helps Moscow reach its foreign policy goals only indirectly, by discrediting and weakening the post-Cold War liberal order. Moreover, other countries such as Hungary and—more confrontational toward Russia—Poland present themselves too as the genuine European identity against a depraved European Union: the champions of dismantling of liberal democracy are plenty, and Moscow does not decide for them.

If soft power is understood as securing support from external audiences, Russia's results are also ambiguous. Gallup yearly surveys show without ambiguity that world public opinion toward Russia is now largely unfavorable (around 70 percent expressing negative views since the 2014 turning point) and that only about a quarter of it expresses a positive opinion of Russia—a big change from the mid-2000s, when the results were the reverse: two-thirds positive, one-third negative.[58]

While Russia was able to secure strong support from European illiberal leaders, the potential trickledown effect on electorates has been limited. As stated by Aleksandr Fischer, "It is not apparent that greater linkages between party elites would promote more favorable attitudes toward states at the mass level."[59] Indeed, public opinion is rarely shaped by foreign policy issues, thus reducing the ability of a country to speak and to influence a foreign audience. Anti-establishment parties' voters seem to show more favorable attitudes toward Vladimir Putin but not toward Russia globally, and do not adopt less favorable attitudes toward the United States and NATO.

This can be explained by the fact that anti-establishment parties share strong Eurosceptic attitudes, prior to any position on foreign policy issues. Their electorate may be more receptive to anti-EU narratives coming from Russia, but Moscow does not

58 See the entry "Russia" on Gallup website, https://news.gallup.com.
59. A. Fisher, "Trickle Down Soft Power: Do Russia's Ties to European Parties Influence Public Opinion?", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2020.

control that sentiment and can only, at best, play on it in an opportunistic way.[60] As explained by Maria Snegovaya, "the agendas of these groups are rarely set by the Kremlin, but rather temporarily align with the latter's interests". This exposes the inherent limitation of Russia's conservative soft power—what can be called a *confluence*, more than an *influence*, of interests and visions with European national-populists and other illiberal figures throughout the world.[61]

60. M. Snegovaya, "Fellow Travelers or Trojan Horses? Similarities Across pro-Russian Parties' Electorates in Europe", forthcoming.
61. M. Laruelle, "Russian and American Far Right Connections: Confluence, Not Influence", *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 516, March 2018.

Conclusion

Russia has succeeded in its soft-power strategy if one defines it as:

- Targeting micro-audiences that are already either favorable to Russia or disenfranchised from liberal values. Here, Russia succeeded in developing a coherent narrative that reinforces these constituencies in their vision of the world, in being recognized as a legitimate "voice" for these groups, and in connecting them with one another to create a domino effect, with a cumulative power of influence. Russia is thus more focused on preserving its influence in what is already a potential pro-Russian space—either historically and culturally, or because it is already anti-liberal—than on conquering hearts and minds on a large scale.
- Structuring a counter soft power to the so-called liberal West that destabilizes the competitor and positions itself as an alternative. Here, Russia exploits to its own advantage the weaknesses of the liberal order, both domestically and internationally, to protect the current regime from external pressures. It does not create illiberal movements or regimes but can offer them "hard" and "soft" tools of resilience. On the "soft" side, it acts as an echo chamber by giving them the floor through state-sponsored media and public diplomacy institutions. Yet, this does not help Moscow to directly influence voters and their foreign policy positionings, which are shaped by other, homegrown criteria.
- Being protected from normative intrusions by being recognized as a great power. In this case, being seen as a new threat can act as a protective measure. The Kremlin's goal of restoring Russia's greatness—to raise both admiration and fear—seems to have worked well: in a 2018 Pew survey covering 25 countries, 42 percent of those polled saw Russia as having gained in power over the past ten years (52 percent in the US), while only 19 percent (mostly outside Europe) saw it as declining.[62]

A granular approach to Russia's niche strategy confirms the existence of a non-universalistic soft power, based on a country's particularisms. One major characteristic of Russia's power projection is indeed conservatism in the sense of counter-liberalism: issues of morality and so-called traditional family, notion of "sovereignism", and patterns of illiberal governance form central components of

62. R. Wike *et al.*, "China's Power Seen as Rising More Than Other Major Nations", Pew Research Center, 1 October 2018, www.pewglobal.org.

Russia's micro-targeting. But these conservative niches should not be automatically conflated with Russia's "joker" status: in some aspects, RT and Sputnik's provocative tone and cynical attitudes of whataboutism do not articulate well with a genuine conservative vision of the world. Moreover, some niches of Russian soft power are not related to conservatism *per se* but to the country's own history and culture. However, they can create a ripple effect with it. For instance, Russia's activation of ethnic Russians in Germany has contributed to the electoral success of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).[63]

There are two important policy repercussions of identifying Russia's non-universalistic soft power.

First, new research shows that the myth of "foreign influence" on public opinion does not survive scholarly testing. Looking at international audiences' views of Russia and the United States across 50 countries from 2012 to 2017, Aleksandr Fisher found that citizens hold similar attitudes toward Russia and the United States, and rarely choose sides. Although attitudes have become more polarized in several European countries as geopolitical tensions increase, they remain largely positively related.[64] Moreover, research has shown that making people more aware of foreign propaganda does not attenuate its potential influence.[65] One of the key consequences is that state-sponsored programs, in the US or in Europe, that fight against "Russian (or Chinese) disinformation" by exposing counter-facts miss the point and do not persuade people to change their mind. At best, they may help to put a hold on some campaigns. The only sustainable solution is to be found in fighting against the echo-chamber nature of today's media ecosystem, and especially on social media.

Second, the Cold War-inspired vocabulary of denouncing Russia's discursive machine as "propaganda" is not only conceptually mistaken, but also policy misconceived: propaganda is unidirectional, while public diplomacy is interactive and gives the floor to the reception side, too.[66] The lack of research on the demand side of Russia's soft power obscures the grassroots motivations of all those promoting Russia in their home countries. Labelling them "Putin's useful idiots"[67] totally misses the point of shared viewpoints and convergence of geopolitical visions and pragmatic interests. It also

63. M. Laruelle and E. Rivera, *Collusion or Homegrown Collaboration? Connections Between German Far Right and Russia*, Budapest: *Political Capital,* 2019.
64. A. Fisher, "A New Cold War? International Public Opinion of Russia and the United States", *International Journal of Public Opinion Research,* Vol. 32, No. 1, Spring 2020, pp. 143-152.
65. A. Fisher, "Demonizing the Enemy: The Influence of Russian State-Sponsored Media on American Audiences", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 2020, pp. 1-16.
66. J. Melissen (ed.), *The New Public Diplomacy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 19-22.
67. See for instance, among many others, D. Milbank, "Putin's Useful Idiots", *The Washington Post,* 20 February 2018, www.washingtonpost.com.

means, for the Kremlin, that there may be an unexpected spillover effect of shifting its international partners' ideological positioning, and of Russia's own posture—pushing the country, for instance, to support overly far-right regimes or politicians it would not have supported otherwise, or even Bashar al-Assad, no matter how embarrassing it might be. It thus remains to be seen how the interaction between a fluid ideological landscape in Europe and the US, and a weakened but still resilient Putin regime will affect Russia's niche soft power in the medium and long term.

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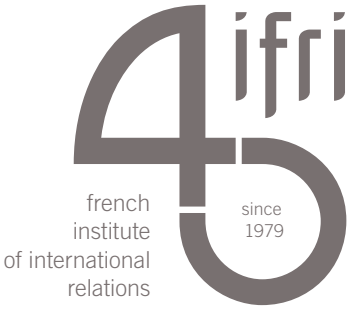

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