



# Perception of Russia's soft power and influence in the Baltic States



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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore and analyse the different means and mechanisms of influence employed by Russia on the three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania). By influence, it means the attempt to try and get another country to behave in a manner that benefits the influencer's policy and/or interests. As such, this can entail exerting one of two forms of power, hard or soft (as defined by Nye, 2004) to bring about the compliance. The current paper restricts its focus to those mechanisms related to shaping opinion and perception, such as public diplomacy (in its various forms).

To begin with the paper shall define the various concepts used – influence, power and public diplomacy. It shall then shift to the different Russian institutions that have been created to shape and manage influence, such as Russky Mir or Rossotrudnichestvo. Plus there are those other elements that exist in the region – Russian compatriots and Russian language media (both local and external to the Baltic States). Then the paper shall deal with relations between Russia and the Baltic States, with a focus upon recent history. Sources shall not be limited to academic literature and mass media resources, but will also include interviews for an 'insider' perspective on the issue. The responses shall be used to address the following question: How do people in the Baltic States perceive Russian soft power and influence?

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## 1. Introduction

Given the various upheavals that are currently and simultaneously occurring around the world it may be possible to overlook some of the more discreet and indirect means of gaining foreign policy goals and interests. However, the issue of soft power and influence in international relations is a hot topic and its interest and relevance is far from decreasing. How does one country influence another through the use of public diplomacy and soft power? The various mechanisms and structures that are created and employed to bring about influence may be developed over a long period of time. There also needs to be alignment between words and deeds, plus a sustained and consistent effort if there is to be a chance of success.

This paper concerns the different means and mechanisms that Russia employs in its effort to try and influence developments and events in the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania). These countries provide Russian public diplomacy and influence efforts with a significant challenge, not least by held stereotypes and perceptions, and the very efforts that are employed. The orientation of the work is that it is taken from the perspective of how the actions and activities of official Russian governmental and bureaucratic structures are received and interpreted by Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians. There

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is a focus on the public's understanding, rather than a focus on the political elite. The political elite have a clear Western oriented focus in policy, such as membership to NATO, the EU and adopting the Euro. Qualitative research was conducted with residents of the Baltic States in the spring of 2014, which generated some interesting indicative findings. Therefore, what do the responses indicate about the nature of Russian soft power and influence in the Baltic States?

A first step is to discuss and explain the terms public diplomacy, soft power and persuasion. These are all integral concepts that are used, therefore they must be defined. There also needs to be an explanation as to how these different concepts interact with each other. How Russia engages in public diplomacy and influence is the next subject matter. Recently, Russia has invested much time and effort in increasing its public diplomacy programmes and capacity. A short section then follows, on the state of relations between Russia and the Baltic States, which is intended to give context to answers in the following section. The following section provides details of responses received by the author to qualitative research that was conducted among Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians to gain an insight into how Russia and Russians are perceived, and to identify the positive and negative attributes that are associated with their neighbour. The survey work is intended as a first step to a larger more comprehensive follow up at a later stage, which means that the results are not to be viewed from the perspective as being generalisations, but possible indications that should be investigated further..

## 2. Public diplomacy, soft power and persuasion

The term Public Diplomacy (PD) is a much contested and at times misunderstood term and practice. Although there is some measure of agreement on what constitutes its core activities (Paul, 2011). In addition, it is understood as being a two-way and interactive form of communication (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012: p. 288). PD is a form of government to people (G2P) communication and therefore differs from traditional diplomacy that is a form of government to government communication. "Public diplomacy comprises the efforts of governments from one nation to send messages directly to the "people" in another country and is part of soft power" (Coombs & Holladay, 2010: p. 299). This is a constantly evolving form of communication and interaction, which responds to changes in the political, social and technological environment (Hocking, 2005). One possible concise definition is as follows.

Public diplomacy [...] deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012: p. 287).

There are many different parts and components of PD, which is seen in the above mentioned quote. However, it is not only about informing foreign publics, but it is also about influencing them in a manner that benefits the foreign policy and interests of the country communicating the message (Farwell, 2012: pp. 47–53; Snow, 2006: p. 227). A specific method is embarked upon, to influence the foreign publics, but there are usually some boundaries. The above is a short summary of the 'word' aspects of PD, now to turn to the 'deeds' part.

PD programmes and means in terms of physical deeds are wide and varied in practice and include different options. Various activities associated with PD includes: educational exchanges and programmes for scholars and students, language and culture training/education, visitor programmes, cultural exchanges and events, radio and TV broadcasting. Elements associated with these activities are advocacy, listening, culture and exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting (Paul, 2011: p. 35; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012: pp. 287–288). There are a total of three different aspects associated with PD:

- "Information: information management and distribution with an emphasis on short-term events or crises;
- Influence: longer term persuasion campaigns aiming to effect attitudinal change amongst a target population (sometimes referred to as "moving the needle"); and
- Engagement: building relationships, also over the long term, to cultivate trust and mutual understanding between peoples (be they groups, organisations, nations, etc.)" (Paul, 2011: pp. 43–44).

PD can take a lot of time and effort to create a desired effect upon the targeted audience, it is about creating interaction and relationships through communication. It is also done with a particular purpose in mind, to assist with the realisation of foreign policy goals. This fact can be hedged in polite phrases and rhetoric that both parties get something from the mutual interaction. PD is also linked to the notion of power, namely soft power, although soft power and PD is not the same thing. This is a means of trying to cultivate and project soft power (Hayden, 2012). This begs the question, what is power within the context of PD and international relations?

There are two alternative ways of wielding power – through fear and coercion or through attraction and co-opting. One needs to bear in mind that "power always depends on the context in which the relationship exists." If objectives seem to be legitimate and just, others may willingly assist without the use of coercion or inducements (Nye, 2004: p. 2). In order to proceed, there needs to be an understanding of power and how it is related to PD.

PD is a means of promoting a country's soft power. At its core, soft power is "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment." Each country's soft power is connected to its

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