Russian soft power in Ukraine: A structural perspective

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I adopt a structural approach to Russian soft power, switching focus from the supposed agent of power (Russia), towards the subjects of power (Ukrainians). I outline the applicability of this approach to empirical studies into soft power, demonstrating how soft power can be examined from bottom-up, discursively-focused perspectives.

The empirical analysis then traces how Ukrainians (do not) link their self-identities to discursive understanding of "Russia". Reviewing recent insights into the relationship between soft power and affect, I argue that Ukrainians' cultural, historical and linguistic ties with Russia often lack necessary emotional force to generate meaningful soft power.

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Russian soft power has been subject to extensive academic and governmental scrutiny, especially in relation to Russia's aims of increasing its non-military influence in the post-Soviet space. Numerous studies have examined the soft power strategies and resources employed by the Russian state to improve its image abroad, and to further its foreign policy interests (for example: Tsygankov, 2006; Kudors and Pelnens, 2015; Flavier, 2015). The bulk of the extant literature suggests that while Russia possesses an extensive range of soft power resources, it is often unable to utilise these effectively in support of its foreign policy objectives (Sergunin, 2016, p. 58; Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016). In this article, I do not fundamentally challenge this position. I do, however, address the salient question of *why* Russian soft power has been largely ineffective, especially in areas with ostensibly favourable historical, cultural and resource-based conditions.

Nowhere is this puzzle more apparent than the case of Ukraine, where Russia has attempted to activate its soft power potential through various cultural, diplomatic, economic and informational channels (Bogomolov and Lytvynenko, 2012). Additionally, as the Ukraine-specific literature attests, many Ukrainians share identity narratives which incorporate favourable views of Russia, the Russian people, the Russian language and Russian culture (Korostelina, 2013). Within such identificational processes, delineations between Ukrainian and Russian identities have often been blurred, mutable and complex. At the political level, competition between presidential candidates and political parties has often been pitched as a struggle between "Eurasian," that is, more favourable towards cooperation with Russia, and "European" forces (Kuzio, 2005, 35). While this demonstrates a level of contestation in Ukrainian identity politics, it also provides evidence of potentially fertile ground for Russian soft power within large sections of Ukrainian society. This is especially apparent if we bear in mind the oft-cited link between culture, identities and soft power (Feklyunina, 2015).

Recently, however, survey data and political and societal analyses have highlighted the perceptible alienation of Ukrainians towards the Russian state (Kulyk, 2016; Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2016a, b; International Republican Institute, 2016; IFES, 2014), further reinforced by an increasing desire for European integration at the expense of integration with Russia (Samakhvalov, 2015; Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2016a, b). This potential contradiction

demands further scrutiny, not least because (as documented below) many Ukrainians have not entirely abandoned shared cultural and historical identities with Russia and the former Soviet Union. The prominent role of the Russian language, for example, appears to be less politically salient than one might expect, considering the increase in hostility towards Russia itself (Kulyk, 2016, p. 601).

Research which adopts a top-down, resource—focused approach to soft power, often skips past these issues, at times conflating manifestations of culture (including language) with soft power proper. Therefore, while the literature is able to pinpoint various weaknesses in Russia's institutionalisation, conceptualisation and implementation of soft power (Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016), there has been little systematic effort to explain sufficiently why Ukrainians themselves appear relatively immune to Moscow's soft power initiatives. Here, I argue that it is important to move the debate beyond the policies and practices of the Russian Federation, towards the crucial role of the "targets" of soft power.

Taking a bottom-up approach, the ensuing study therefore examines the (non-)effects of Russian soft power in Ukraine. Key to this analysis is the role of emotion, or affect, towards the actual functioning of Ukrainian identities, and their subsequent relationship with Russian soft power. Instead of viewing identities and cultural affinity as being intrinsically tied in with soft power, I argue that cultural proximity and overlapping identities with Russia do not necessarily lead to soft power on their own. Instead, it is important to examine the emotional trajectories that accompany identities.

Overall, data generated from focus group interviews in Kyiv are used to derive three key explanations for the relative weakness of Russian soft power in Ukraine: 1) The competing affective appeal of "Europe"; 2) The increasing salience of a Ukrainian identity which rejects close association with Russian narratives and aesthetics; and 3) The effects of Russia's perceived aggressive foreign policy and information campaign against Ukraine, which significantly undermine shared identificational attachments. This study therefore sheds light on the identificational attachments Ukrainians have towards Russia, but adds the crucial element of affect to this analysis. This, it is argued, helps to explain why shared cultural perspectives and practices do not necessarily equate into soft power.

1. A bottom-up approach to soft power

The literature has moved on considerably from Joseph Nye's original contribution (1990), and from his subsequent work which defined soft power as the ability to attract and persuade — in contradistinction to hard power which was the capability to coerce (2004). In Nye's (2011a, b) book (2011b), he expounds upon his theory by paying closer attention to the nature of power. Nye focuses upon the "three faces of power" now widely identified within the literature, that is, "inducing others to do what they otherwise would not do", "framing and setting agenda", and "shaping others' preferences", (2011b, pp. 90—94) setting out to demonstrate how each face has two dimensions — one coercive (hard power) and one based on attraction (soft power).

While these faces of power are important tools for the study of soft power, Nye neglects the "fourth face of power", largely influenced by the work of Michel Foucault (Digeser, 1992). The limitation of the first three faces of power is that power is understood in a relational sense (Lock, 2009, pp. 36—7), whereby one actor is able to exercise power over another either directly or indirectly. These approaches therefore give primacy to the agency of the actor who wishes to create power.

The fourth face of power, however, is attuned to the agency of the subject of power (Allen, 2002, pp. 134—136). Power, in this sense, can be understood as structural rather than relational. It is structural because power surrounds us and does not come from a single actor. Instead, actors live in complex social worlds and have to derive meanings from a range of potential sources (Foucault, 1982, p. 781). Power consequently proceeds from our interpretations of the world around us and our place within it.

This structural approach consequently opens important avenues for the study of soft power. However, it simultaneously challenges a number of Nye's core assumptions. Nye (2011a, p. 16) goes as far as suggesting that "the insights Foucault and other structuralists provide are purchased at too high a price in terms of conceptual complexity and abstraction." One of the biggest objections is that structuralist approaches obscure the role of agency within power relations, an issue that has been at the heart of scholarly debates into Russian soft power (Feklyunina, 2015, pp. 6—9). In the first three faces of power, attraction manifests itself through logical persuasion or "rational" appeals made by concrete actors. For the fourth face of power, power is dispersed and it is impossible to locate a single source of power. Despite criticisms, however, that Foucault leaves little space for human agency (Allen, 2002), the structural approach can help to focus attention on the agency of subjects who have some latitude to negotiate their own meanings and "truth". This, O'Hara (1992, pp. 134—6) argues, is increasingly apparent in Foucault's latter writings. Structuralist[1] approaches therefore focus on the sociolinguistic functions of language and the way that meanings are negotiated by a broad range of individual actors, that is, the subjects of power.

This subject-centred approach to agency also encourages thoughtful reconsideration of the nature of attraction. For Nye, soft power is defined by its capacity to be attractive rather than coercive. Attraction therefore lies at the heart of the concept. However, as Bially Mattern (2005) has pointed out, Nye's central explanations for attraction: attraction as natural and attraction as evidence-based reasoning, are both deficient and underdeveloped.[2] In both cases the problem centres on the assumption that reality and reason are fixed. In practice, though, "interlocutors often don't even share understandings of what

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[1] For the sake of consistency, I use the term 'structuralist' to describe this broad approach throughout the paper. This is in line with Nye's use of the term.
[2] In fairness to Nye, his latter works hint at a more complex conceptualisation of attraction, even if this is never fully developed (Nye, 2009, p. 6).