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The Sources of Russia's Soft Power in Relation to Belarus

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Abstract

This paper aims to evaluate the sources of Russia's soft power as a tool which should enable it to integrate Belarus more closely with Russia. The research question is as follows: what are Russia's main sources of attractiveness, and what kind of instruments of soft power is the Russian government applying to achieve that aim? To what extent was this soft policy successful? The author applied a qualitative research method. It is inductive and allows the researcher to explore meanings and insights into Russia's notion of "soft power" in its foreign policy toward Belarus. The basis of it lies in the interpretive approach to the present reality of Russia – Belarus political and economic relations and in the evaluation of Russian efforts to integrate its closest neighbour by using only non-military means.

Keywords: soft power, hard power, information warfare, Belarus-Russia

Introduction

The impact of soft power policy used by states is rather difficult to evaluate. It is associated with intangible resources such as culture, religion, and ideology. It is defined in the literature as 'soft power' and may also include the

usage of economic instruments, rather ‘carrots’ than ‘sticks’. That is why the author used qualitative research to evaluate the impact of Russian soft policy on Belarus. It is inductive and allows the researcher to explore meanings and insights into Russia’s notion of “soft power” in its foreign policy toward Belarus. The basis of it lies in the interpretive approach to the present reality of Russia – Belarus political and economic relations and in the evaluation of Russian efforts to integrate its closest neighbour by using only non-military means. Russia’s soft power impact on Belarus, based on public opinion polls, has been interpreted by the author in conclusion.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, as emphasised by Kostecki (2022):

An important feature of Russian-Belarusian relations, in particular over the past twenty-five years, was Russia’s desire to make Belarus dependent. On the other hand, the Republic of Belarus was taking more or less consistent actions to preserve its sovereignty, while maintaining an alliance with Russia and the associated political and economic benefits. ... Formulated integration concepts ranged from loose cooperation agreements, the creation of an economic and customs union, to the intention of incorporating Belarus into the structures of the Russian Federation.

All the time, Russia insisted on bringing about a “deeper integration” of Belarus and Russia. The agreements signed in 1999 to establish “The Union State of Belarus and Russia” were to serve this purpose. The conflict intensified especially in December 2018, when Russia presented the conditions for further financial support. The main of them was to be the Belarusian agreement to start the process of in-depth integration, including the adoption of the single currency, tax and civil code.

Negotiations began in the spring of 2019 and were conducted until autumn. The deep integration agreement was to be signed on December 8, 2019. However, in the opinion of President Lukashenko, this agreement was too unfavourable for Belarus, and its conclusion without changes would ultimately lead to the absorption of Belarus by Russia. In the spring of 2020, Minsk and Moscow’s dispute over oil and integration continues and will not go away soon. In the opinion of Carnegie Moscow Centre expert (Shraibman,

2019): “No one truly believes in Lukashenko’s apparent pivot toward the West”. However, the thrust of the Russian position: “if you do not want to integrate with us, then pay your own way, look for cheap oil elsewhere, and let us see how you get on”, has been declining in the last few months.

Inclining President Lukashenko to make concessions through military force, as in the case of the annexation of Crimea and military conflict with Ukraine, is out of the question in the current geopolitical situation. Therefore, Russia has decided to use its “soft power” potential based on centuries of cultural ties with its closest neighbour and economic potential.

Soft Power vs Hard Power – Different Approaches

Joseph Nye first put forth the notion of “soft power” in 1990. Nye defined “soft power” as the opposite of “hard power”, which can be directly expressed in military and economic terms. Nye defined “soft power” as “...the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments”. This broad definition has therefore generated significant debate about its existence, utility, and perceived differences in interpreting its meaning and importance (EssaysUK, 2018).

Like China (Ławniczak, 2015, p. 384), Russia perceives its soft power, broader than the original Nye’s concept – as anything outside of the military and security relations. The Russian approach includes popular culture and public diplomacy, coercive economic and diplomatic ties such as aid and investment, and participation in multilateral organisations (Jędrowiak & Baraniuk, 2019).

The Russian concept of “soft power”, as opposed to “Western interpretations of this category”, is based on:

- another set of values;
- attaching greater importance to “economic soft power”;
- ‘soft power’ category extension, with the concept of ‘information warfare’.

The following set of values underlies the Russian concept of “soft power”: spirituality, collectivism and traditionalism. They conflict with the liberal values of the West: materialism, individualism and rationalism. Adopting the thesis about this separateness of the value system provided the basis for

the conceptualisation of the political use of aspects of Russian soft power, based on two foundations:

- the first, depicting Russia as a refuge of conservative values, which the West abandoned. Particular emphasis is here on attachment to Orthodoxy, hierarchical social order and the traditional family model;
- the second, based on the belief in the need for strong state power, ensuring political stability (Rogoża & Rodkiewicz, 2015).

The economic potential has often been used both as an instrument of “hard power” and, more often, as “soft power”. For instance, the United States has used its economic dominance primarily as a form of hard power in the form of frequent employment of sanctions and trade embargoes against other states. Also, Russia, like China (Ławniczak, 2007), has learnt to use its economic diplomacy, but rather more as “carrots” than as “sticks”. Accordingly, those authoritarian powers apply their economic soft power in their overseas economic programmes for a win-win outcome. Lately, Russian policymakers would naturally see their growing economic leverage as potentially the most effective instrument to advance their country’s overall soft power.

“Information warfare”, in Nye’s opinion, goes well beyond the definition of soft power. He is convinced that Russia cannot yet use its soft power against the “Western world” for offensive purposes as an instrument of “competitive attractiveness”. Instead, in his opinion, “information warfare” is used by Russia offensively to disempower capitalist rivals, and this could be considered ‘negative soft power’ – which means that by attacking the values of others, one can reduce their attractiveness, and thus their “relative soft power” (Nye, 2017). On the other hand, in 2012, President Putin was aware that “soft power is a complex of tools and methods to achieve foreign policy goals ... without using force, through information and other “means of influence”.

The “other means” were later more precisely defined as “information warfare”. Its theoretical background, published in February 2013, is known as “The Gerasimov Doctrine”. According to Gerasimov, the “role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have acceded to the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness” (McKew, 2019). The “non-military means” or “other means of influence” applied by Russia, mainly against the Western “imperialist”

powers, embrace a whole range of actors and tools: troll farms, automatic bots, hackers, social media, media leaks, fake news, and many others.

Soft Power the New Instrument of Russia's Foreign Policy

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia still possessed a huge military potential. However, its cultural and ideological appeal and external image were rather minimal. The new socio-political system and the post-1991 economic chaos, coupled with the “contradictory image” of Boris Yeltsin, caused a persisting Russian identity crisis (Lebedenko, 2004). In the early 2000s, after Vladimir Putin came to power, the “image problem” became an “urgent” issue for the new President. The primary goal of Russian public diplomacy was to project a more positive image of itself in the international community. To rebuild its attractiveness (at least among the former republics). Russia's leadership decided to apply soft power techniques toward its former republics and allies and the West.

The concept of soft power appears three times in the document *The Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* from 2013 (Jędrówiak & Baraniuk, 2019, p. 50):

- for the first time, as a statement that soft power is an integral part of international policy and is comprehensive. It means that it can be managed through: “civil society”, ‘information and communication’, ‘humanitarian’ and through the use of ‘other methods and technologies’;
- for the second time, as emphasising that soft power can also be used negatively, i.e., as a tool of political influence on independent states, involving interference in their internal affairs, and even manipulation of public opinion and creating conditions to destabilise social life (Nye, 2017);
- for the third time, “as a tool in the field of humanitarian cooperation and human rights, which is to create a positive image of Russia arising from its authority, based on issues such as Russian culture, education, science, sport and the level of development of civil society” (Jędrówiak & Baraniuk, 2019, p. 50).

Russia's Use of Soft Power in Relations to Belarus

Russia's soft power competitive attractiveness remains further on a strong enough instrument of foreign policy in relation to Belarus, as well as other former republics. According to Ćwiek-Karpowicz (2012, p. 5), Russia's sources of attractiveness in the post-Soviet space are related to at least four elements:

- a huge labour market,
- language proximity,
- a common culture,
- enormous energy resources.

Most of the citizens of former Soviet republics do not need a visa to enter Russia, which makes its large labour market quite accessible. Russia remains a very important work destination for about 700 000 Belarus (Ćwiek-Karpowicz, 2012, p. 5).

Language proximity seems to be crucial from the point of view of foreign policy effectiveness. For most Belarus, Russian is still a common language in business, social, cultural, and scientific relations. According to Bickaускаite (2019): "The majority of Belarusians (49 to 78%) use the Russian language in their everyday life. Meanwhile, only 3% say they speak Belarusian daily, regardless of the 48% considering it a native".

Russian is also an important language in education. Most of the Belarusian elite are graduates of Russian universities. Correspondingly, the working language in most kindergartens, schools and universities in Belarus is Russian. Since language is an essential part of one's identity and formation, the Belarusian youth is socialised to adapt to the Russian perspective from an early age.

The popularity of the Russian language also allows extensive use of the media as an effective instrument of Russian soft power. "Belarusian media is a great challenge for our country; Belarusian viewer looks at the world through the eyes of the Kremlin", warns the head of the independent Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAŽ) Andrej Bastuniec (*KRESY24*, 2020):

On average, 50% of programmes and broadcast in the main antenna band are produced in Russia – explains Bastuniec.... both Belarusian state TV channels, as well as native, "hybrid" versions of Russian channels (RTR-Belarus, ONT,

NTW-Belarus), which partially change their content. However, most of it is Russian. In some cases it even comes up to 80%... Belarusians are systematically and regularly given mainly Russian versions and pro-Kremlin views on the most important events in the world.

Additionally, among Russian soft power instruments, one should also underline the important role of the three main Russian GONGO's (Government Oriented Non-Government Organizations) institutionalised as foundations: *Rossotrudnichestvo*, *Russkiy Mir* and *The Gorchakov Fund*. "These Moscow-led organisations are taking over independent media in Belarus and are continuously spreading anti-Western, imperialist information" (Biskauskaite, 2019).

As far as the cultural resources of Russian soft power are concerned, it should be stated that the country has significant potential in this respect. It is evidenced by the rich achievements of literature, music and art, which gives Russian culture the specificity of high culture.

Along with attachment to the Russian language, belonging to the Orthodox religion as part of Russian values is also important as an element of Russian soft power. In the opinion of many experts (Pacak, 2012, p. 203; Curanovic, 2010, p. 195):

The religious tradition in Russia and considered a resource of "soft power" appears in the form of two phenomena: "religious renaissance" and "clericalisation of the public sphere". The power of influence of religion is heavily used by the authority, whose main representatives, especially presidents, have emphasised attachment and unity with church authority in recent years. The incorporation of religion into public and everyday life by the Russian authorities serves to strengthen the image of Russia and as a modern state and cooperating with other entities.

Huge energy resources are another Russian "soft power" source. According to the *Statistical Overview of World Energy 2015*, 10% of the world is at the disposal of this country's oil fat deposits, 40% natural gas deposits, over 45% resources hard coal and many other rare sources of raw materials.

Like Ukraine or Georgia, Belarus strongly feels Russian economic soft power based on using oil and gas resources as a foreign policy tool. The tactics used include a rich set of methods: from threats or raising or lowering prices, through pipeline failure, to unconditional embargoes.

Especially the prices of energy resources imported from Russia play a special role in the mutual relations between Russia and Belarus. The Belarusian economy is based on subsidies from income-generating sectors, such as the petrochemical industry, of unprofitable areas, such as agriculture. The increase in prices of raw materials imported from Russia, processed by Belarusian refineries, results in a decrease in the ability to subsidise other branches of the unprofitable economy. That is why Belarus was forced to try to find an alternative to oil from Russia. An attempt to diversify imports was forced on President Lukashenko when, on January 3, 2020, the “Belneftekhim” management announced that Russia had suspended oil supplies to Belarus via the Friendship pipeline, leaving Belarusian refineries in Mozyr and Nowopołock with sufficient reserves for just two weeks of production. It was a powerful blow to a country whose main export commodity is petroleum products.

The suspension of oil supplies can be interpreted as the Kremlin’s reaction to the failure of talks to date and an attempt to use economic “soft power” to put pressure on Minsk. In response to this blackmail, President Lukashenko instructed Belarusian refineries to find alternative sources of supply. Azerbaijan has become the obvious choice, but also the possibility of using supplies from other directions, among others from the US oil supply offer, was considered.

After several months of negotiations, at the beginning of April 2020, Russia gave way to the demands of Belarus, and Russian companies resumed deliveries. The Russian side also agreed that oil will come at a discounted price while negotiations for resuming regular imports continue, according to a “Belneftekhim” statement.

Collapsing Russia’s Attractive Following the Invasion on Ukraine

In the research conducted on March 14, 2022 by “Brand Finance” David Haigh (Brand Finance, 2022), its Chairman and CEO, commented:

By invading Ukraine, Russia has undermined its ability to exert influence on the world. It is now seen as an aggressor, with the public across much of the world highly critical of its conduct. With its soft power shattered, Russia will find it almost impossible to attract or persuade international partners – whether in business or in diplomacy.

In the Chatham House survey from March 22, 2022 (Chatham House, 2022), the most interesting block of questions concerned the direct participation of Belarus in hostilities. The authors of this study came to the following conclusion:

Russian and Belarusian propaganda obviously works. As the authors of the study note, almost a third of Belarusians are in favour of pro-Russian options for action. And another quarter – for the complete neutrality of our country. The fifth of the respondents are in favour of pro-Ukrainian options. Answering the question “What should Belarus do after the outbreak of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine?” 28% believe that it is necessary to support the actions of Russia, but not to enter into a military conflict.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the impact of Russia's soft policy, aiming at fully integrating Belarus with Russia, is further on rather limited. According to the study published at the end of 2019 by an independent research centre Białoruski Warsztat Analityczny (*doRZECZY*, 2020), 75% of the respondents believe that Belarus and Russia must remain “independent friendly countries” with open borders. The survey also shows that during this year, the group of supporters of integration with Russia decreased by more than 10%. Therefore, the goal of integration with Russia, defined by Lukaszienka in 2016, as “living in the same building as Russia but in a separate apartment”, remains valid. (Shraibman, 2018, p. 11). Taking into consideration that following the invasion on Ukraine, Russia's soft power further collapsed – this model of common relations became more valid.

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