
THE EROSION OF RUSSIAN SOFT POWER – SOME POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPEAN POLITICS

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Abstract: Russia's decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, which drastically altered the perception that Europe is destined to remain a zone of tranquility and has, as of the autumn of 2025, no clear end in sight, has shattered certain illusions regarding the ways in which liberal democratic countries may keep expansionist autocratic states in check and contributed to a profound reordering of the international system in terms of the post-Cold War rules-based order. While Russia's eagerness and ability to successfully use soft power as part of its foreign policy toolkit has been contested by a number of scholars, it is reasonable to assume that one of the reasons Russia's massive escalation of the Ukrainian crisis, which had already begun in 2014, was deemed surprising even among a number of military experts, may be attributable to the expectation that the Russian state would not be inclined to take an all-out gamble on the hard power instrumentarium and seemingly discard its soft power potential. The paper employs a qualitative methodology, which includes an integrated analysis of a variety of secondary sources within the social science domain. It fulfils three primary objectives. Firstly, it argues that there are ample reasons to support the assertion that Russia's waging of war against the entire country of Ukraine has severely curtailed its ability to project soft power, with no clear indications that these reputational damages could at all be salvageable in the conceivable future. Secondly, it contends that Russia's soft power goes hand in hand with the success of its disinformation campaigns, so it is virtually inevitable that the country's actions in Ukraine will diminish its effectiveness with regard to engaging in such adversarial activities over the course of the next decades. Thirdly, Russia's war has encouraged many European countries to crack down on Russian media outlets and in certain cases ban certain parties that are viewed as pro-Russian from contesting elections. There are plenty of reasons to assume that at least until the war has conclusively ended, a new type of cordon sanitaire politics targeting pro-Russian parties may become par for the course in the political arena. Thus, Russia has most certainly suffered a decisive loss when it comes to being a paragon of soft power in the hearts and minds of the vast majority of Ukrainians, but the long-term negative effects in terms of the political space accorded to it in order to pursue disinformation operations will not be confined to Ukraine.

Keywords: soft power, disinformation, cordon sanitaire, Russia, Eastern Europe

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of soft power can be traced to the scholarly work of Hans J. Morgenthau, Klaus Knorr, and Ray S. Cline. However, it came to prominence mainly because of the academic contributions made by American political scientist Joseph S. Nye Jr., who is often depicted as the "father of soft power". (Ogunnoiki et al., 2025) Nye defined soft power as the ability to shape other actors' preferences by creating a perception of legitimacy and attraction (Nye Jr., 2022) rather than through brute force, the threat of force or overwhelming economic strength, which typify the carrots and sticks approach associated with hard power. All major countries possess varying degrees of soft power, (Wilson, 2021) with sovereign states' soft power, according to Nye, resting on three primary resources: culture, political values and ideals, and foreign policy. (Borshchevskaya, 2021) Nye's particular conception of soft power most accurately describes the appeal of liberal democracies because it attaches a special importance to civil societies, non-state actors, and "universal values" (Wilson, 2021). Regarding the applicability of soft power to Russia, it is worth pointing out that even prior to 2022 some scholars downplayed its role in Russia's foreign policy, with a few Western policymakers even arguing that Russia totally lacks the power to attract because of the nature of its human rights infringements. (Borshchevskaya, 2021) Forsberg and Smith appraise the term soft power as not particularly instructive when it comes to Russia, so they instead employ the concept of "cultural statecraft", which focuses on the use of certain cultural techniques and instruments that are available to the Russian leadership (Cuppuleri & Ashiku, 2024) while Nye himself has portrayed many of Russia's actions in relation to wielding soft power as actually befitting of the "sharp power" designation. (Ageeva, 2021) In the same vein, other academics have been inclined to regard Russia's soft power as a hidden form of hard power, intricately tied with hybrid warfare, destabilization campaigns directed against rival countries' political systems, and elements of "soft coercion". (Kazharski, 2020) Russia, by using soft power, essentially tries to act as a joker or a trickster on the international scene – it recognizes that it enjoys a rather limited capacity to transform the Western-dominated international system, so undermining it from within is more affordable and sufficient to address its security- and status-related concerns. (Laruelle, 2021) All in all, Russia has been described as displaying a preference for state-directed

approaches to realizing their version of soft power instead of a reliance on civil society actors (Wilson, 2021) Some Russians themselves echo the above sentiments, with pro-Kremlin political scientist Sergey Karaganov acknowledging that Russian political leaders have largely interpreted soft power in instrumental and pragmatic ways, with coercion as well as economically driven influence (“payment”) part of their understanding of soft power. (Borshchevskaya, 2021) However, there are still grounds on which to argue that even if Russia’s general take on soft power may not be synonymous with and sufficiently comparable to that of the West, prior to 2022 the country has on a multitude of occasions certainly been cognizant of the benefits of conventional soft power and has been interested in harnessing them. Keating and Kaczmarek argue that Russia definitely manifests a capacity for soft power projection, for instance courtesy of it generating ideological attraction through the promotion of conservative values in a fashion that can be appealing from the standpoint of several different groups that are part of the liberal democratic world. (Cuppuleri & Ashiku, 2024) There are three categories of Russian ideological soft power influence that resonate strongly beyond the borders of Russia, especially with nationalist-populist parties in other countries in Europe: moral conservatism, illiberal governance, and strong leadership. (Cuppuleri & Ashiku, 2024) In particular, an essential component of Russia’s multipolar soft power is the image of a powerful and pragmatic leader embodied in Vladimir Putin, as for example evidenced in certain statements made by former Presidents of Republika Srpska Željka Cvijanović and Milorad Dodik, who have extolled the virtues of strong leadership, also drawing parallels between Putin and Donald Trump. (Cuppuleri & Ashiku, 2024) In the foreign policy realm, another facet of Russian soft power politics, which did not dissipate in 2014 when the country illegally annexed Crimea, was tied to the emphasis on upholding sovereignty and territorial integrity. For instance, Putin has consistently criticized the “Kosovo precedent” (Barlovac, 2014) as part of Russia’s soft power appeals to Western Balkans countries such as Serbia, its closest ally in the region, and North Macedonia.

If we are to take a brief chronological journey, the origin of Russia’s post-Cold War soft power can actually be traced back to the political rise of Putin and his desire, expressed in the early years of his political career, to reconstruct the global image of Russia by making it an attractive country on the international scene. Fiona Hill, a British-American academic and former advisor on Russian affairs to US President Donald Trump, stated in August 2004 that Moscow’s soft power projection efforts in the former Soviet Union were clearly effective. According to her evaluation, the results of Moscow’s attempts to employ soft power, for instance when it came to cultivating an image of a neutral powerbroker and peacemaker, were so significant in the early Putin years that they even outweighed Moscow’s hard power projection. (Borshchevskaya, 2021) Russia’s January 2008 Foreign Policy Concept covered traditional themes such as multipolarity and the need to challenge American domination within the international system, but also put an emphasis on soft power in general as a way of strengthening Russia’s position on the world stage. Following Moscow’s war against Georgia in August 2008, the Kremlin stepped up its propaganda campaigns for the purpose of improving its international image, especially in the West. The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (known simply as Rossotrudnichestvo) was established by presidential decree in September 2008 with the aim of preserving Russia’s influence in the [post-Soviet](#) states and fostering friendly ties that could be beneficial in terms of Russia’s economic and political interests. (Ibid) In July 2012 Putin touted the importance of using soft power at a high-level meeting with Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives in international organizations. In February 2013 Russia officially incorporated soft power into its foreign policy toolkit. (Ibid) There are also signs that prior to the invasion of Ukraine many members of the Russian elite valued the importance of soft power, with Putin garnering praise for increasing Russia’s international influence and making the country a respected member of the world community of states. (Rivera, 2022)

2.MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper utilizes qualitative methodologies and is faithful to the unobtrusive research method, which eliminates certain ethical dilemmas pertaining to the direct elicitation of information from research participants. (Benton & French, 2024) The article attempts to systematically integrate the findings from multiple studies, including academic papers, policy briefs, opinion polls, and newspaper reports, in order to extend the scope of knowledge when it comes to the particular subject matter. The information that is gleaned from the literature review serves as a linchpin for the discovery of new thematic undercurrents. There is a constant feedback loop between theory and data, with an open-ended process of data collection, which is discontinued only once a saturation point has been conclusively reached. (Ahmed, 2025) Given the inductive nature of the study, the dataset is not approached with a specific theoretical framework in mind. (L. Haven & Van Grootel, 2019)

3.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Russia's "special military operation" targeting Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, managed to catch quite a few geopolitical experts off guard and quickly sent shockwaves throughout the international system. Since the very beginning of the conflict, a consensus has been emerging among scholars that in addition to the setbacks suffered in terms of the significant losses in military personnel and the inability to achieve most of its initially stated aims, the country has severely depleted another valuable resource – its ability to project soft power. In many sovereign states that share borders with Russian Federation, which quite a few Russian nationalists consider to be part of the *Russkiy Mir* or "Russian world", Russia has increasingly started to be viewed as a belligerent country that is now inclined to throw around its military might for the sake of recasting itself as a global power. This discourse has been common among academics from nation-states such as those in the Caucasus region and Central Asia, (Roth, 2023) with the erosion of Russian soft power in its immediate neighborhood attributable not only to the launching of the invasion itself, but also because of indirect effects – local resentments in nation-states such as Georgia and Kazakhstan brought about by the presence of Russian citizens who had fled their own country, its diminishing geopolitical relevance in nation-states such as Armenia where Russia has been unable to live up to the billing in terms of providing the necessary support in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and some degree of skepticism regarding the true extent of its conventional military superiority, with the Ukraine quagmire serving to illuminate a number of shortcomings of the Russian armed forces. (Cenusa, 2023) In terms of the Western Balkans, where Russia has over the decades crafted an image as the only genuine great power protector of the Balkan Slavs, (Reid, 2024) it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain argument that it is sincerely committed to territorial integrity and national sovereignty. There are some signs that even in countries such as Serbia, which are often characterized as global pro-Russian outliers where Russian soft power has retained a lot of resilience, (Samorukov & Vuksanović, 2023) the members of the political establishment and ordinary citizens are more careful than ever when it comes to casting their lots with Russia in terms of foreign policy orientations. (Craig, 2025) In addition to the changing perceptions of Russia in the sovereign states that are part of its near abroad, there are also objective measurements, which can shed further light on the underlying tendencies – according to the 2023 Global Soft Power Index, Russia's reputation ranking (one of the key determinants of soft power) fell from the 23rd to the 105th position, with Russia losing serious ground across 8 different soft power pillars. (Modern Diplomacy, 2023) Russia's Brand Finance (BraFi) ranking also saw a sharp decline in the years following the start of the Ukraine war. (Jagodzinski, 2024) Another ingredient of soft power touched upon in the introductory part concerns Russia's attempts to portray itself as a rational and reasonable conservative power that provides a viable alternative to the purported social dysfunction associated with extreme political liberalism in the West. However, this component of Russian soft power has inevitably been negatively affected as well. The inability to subdue Ukraine and achieve any semblance of a quick victory has raised skepticism regarding the degree to which rationality could really be considered to be the main driver of Putin's foreign policy actions. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been characterized as an unusual lapse of judgment on the part of Putin and been likened to a desperate tantrum thrown by an authoritarian regime on the decline rather than a geopolitically rational course of action. (Charushin, 2025) After the outbreak of the war, intelligence analysts such as former Secretary of Defense and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director Robert Gates and politicians like current United States secretary of state Marco Rubio publicly expressed the viewpoint that there was something that did not exactly compute when it came to Putin's actions in Ukraine. (Geist, 2022) Even Trump, who has generally avoided being overly critical of the Russian president and repeatedly tried engaging in a conciliatory foreign policy towards Russia, stated in a Truth Social post on 26 May 2025 that "Putin has gone absolutely crazy" after Russia's massive aerial attacks on Ukraine that resulted in further civilian casualties. (Mason et al., 2025) The nuclear saber-rattling engaged in by a multitude of Russian state officials has only further served to stoke fears regarding the Kremlin's irrationality.

A second major problematic aspect (from the standpoint of Russia), which is tied to the erosion of the country's soft power, concerns the ever diminishing space for the promotion of disinformation in Europe, in part due to the imposition of certain legal restrictions on the EU level. On 1 March 2022, in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Council of the European Union adopted Regulation 2022/350 that suspended the broadcasting activities of Russian state-affiliated media Sputnik and Russia Today. (Vériter, 2025) The importance of this step is worth highlighting. Firstly, it can be regarded as being at odds with freedom of the press and freedom of information, which are considered staples of liberal democracy. Secondly, the regulation of media content is a competence that is as a rule left to the EU member states themselves. It is believed that perceived ontological insecurity (related to the EU's sense of identity) was a primary reason for the adoption of this broadcasting ban. (Ibid) According to Eurobarometer surveys, ordinary Europeans are now by a large margin in favour of banning Russian state-owned media from broadcasting. (European Union, 2023). Rossotrudnichestvo has also been under EU sanctions since July 2022, including having its assets frozen, due to being explicitly recognized as a Russian

federal executive body dedicated to promoting the Kremlin's soft power. The Russian war against Ukraine appears to be ushering in a notable paradigm shift because of the increasing securitization of disinformation. Thus, from the standpoint of many pro-Russian actors who may be interested in spreading deception, the new forms of oversight as well as the EU's renewed willingness to view the espousal of certain narratives through a security lens signify a tightening of the rules of the game and a notable reduction in the number of avenues for the pursuit of destabilization activities. (Ponomareva, 2025) In addition to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine serving as a wake-up call with regard to the identity-related threats posed by Russia to the EU, the return of high intensity war to the European continent may be a contributing factor to the fostering of a new spirit of unity within countries in Europe. The obvious example is of course Ukraine itself, where Russia's aggression against the country has solidified the Ukrainian national identity, with substantial numbers of Russophone Ukrainians beginning to gravitate towards the Ukrainian cultural project. (Walker, 2022) Somewhat more surprisingly, there is some evidence that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has actually increased the salience of national identification even in countries that are relatively far away from the theater of war and have the luxury not to be overly concerned with direct security risks emanating from Russia. One such example is Spain. It has been described as a country with a relatively weak nationalism and a fragmented sense of national identity compared to other European nation-states because of factors such as the comparatively late nation-building process and the persistent strength of regional identities and peripheral nationalisms (especially in Catalonia and the Basque country). (Storm, 2020) In the 2010s Russia engaged in disinformation campaigns for the purpose of supporting Catalan separatism. (Lautman, 2021) The topic of Russian collusion with individuals associated with the Catalan independence movement resurfaced in the Spanish media shortly after the major escalation of the Ukraine war in February 2022. (Hedgecoe, 2022) A survey by the Catalonia Center for Opinion Studies published in March 2022 revealed that there had been a notable drop in support for Catalan independence, (McKenzie, 2022) with similar findings reported in September 2022. (Keeley, 2022) In accordance with these trends, there is some evidence that Russia's actions in Ukraine have increased the premium placed on national identification in Spain (though not necessarily at the expense of regional or subnational identification). (Balcells et al., 2024) In essence, even threats that are unlikely to be realized (or purely imagined ones) may still go a long way in terms of buttressing national cohesion. While the aim of disinformation is to divide and polarize societies, a society without too many fault lines (Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, 2025) is also more likely to have the psychological resilience to vigorously oppose any narratives that are meant to mislead and create dissension (Zadorožna & Butuc, 2024). Thus, the Putin regime's increasing reliance on hard power may be weakening its own ability to sow discord even when it comes to European countries that may not have the most cohesive national identities.

Thirdly, and in connection to the shrinking space for the peddling of disinformation within Europe, a new form of cordon sanitaire targeting pro-Russian or Russian-leaning parties is likely to become par for the course in many European countries, especially in the eastern half of the continent. In the context of a political system, a sanitary cordon involves establishment parties collectively refusing to cooperate with or form alliances with extremist ones, aiming to reduce their prospects for gaining political influence and entering mainstream politics. This strategy is often employed to preserve democratic values, safeguard social cohesion, and prevent the normalization of radical ideologies. (Worth, 2024) The imposition of a quarantine when it comes to particular parties is by no means a permanent feature of a country's political landscape. For instance, despite controversies surrounding its early association with far-right groups, the right-wing Sweden Democrats (SD) has successfully been rebranding itself as a more moderate party at least since the 2010s, eventually becoming a factor in the Kristersson cabinet following the 2022 Swedish general elections. (Jungar, 2022) As a result of Russia's military aggression in Ukraine, pro-Russian political actors are likely to be tarred with the same brush as the radical right parties in Western Europe because the policies advocated for by the former are frequently at odds with democratic values and worsen social harmony while the attempted normalization of territorial conquest harkens back to certain failed appeasement policies in the era between the two world wars. While, as mentioned above, a number of hardcore nationalist parties have reinvented themselves and are no longer considered to have pariah status, political organizations with pro-Russian leanings are unlikely to be able to escape the "Trojan horse" designation any time soon given the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine, which does not appear to be winding down, the occasional threats made by members of the Russian political elite towards countries not directly involved in the war as well as the likelihood that any moves in the direction of isolating such parties would probably receive positive appraisal in most European countries. In fact, in Eastern Europe a number of pro-Russian parties or independent politicians are already finding it difficult to actually get to the stage of contesting elections. In October 2024 the Romanian Constitutional Court banned Diana Șoșoacă, a pro-Russian candidate affiliated with the S.O.S. Romania party, from the electoral race, arguing that her views were anti-constitutional. (Ilie, 2024) A number of her supporters then flocked to another pro-Russian politician Călin Georgescu whose political campaign was eventually revealed to have been funded and coordinated by state

actors from the Russian Federation. (European Digital Media Observatory, 2024) Georgescu secured the best result in the first round of the 2024 presidential election (held on 24 November 2024), but it was subsequently annulled, and in March 2025 Romania's Central Election Bureau rejected Georgescu's candidacy for the 2025 presidential re-run. (Calus, 2025) While there are still a few uncertainties regarding the exact reasons behind the Romanian authorities' decision, it is quite likely that some of Georgescu's more incendiary pronouncements pertaining to the war unleashed by Russia, such as his characterization of Ukraine as an artificial state and claims that the country would inevitably have to accept a partition of its territories along ethnic lines, (Van Rensbergen, 2025) may have tilted the balance in favor of his removal from the ballot list. In that regard, in neighboring Moldova, which is similarly to Romania often depicted as a frontline state in Russia's near abroad, (Chin & Overby, 2025) and where Russian narratives have for a long time easily gained traction among the general public, (Cenusa, 2024) Russia's aggression against Ukraine has contributed to fast-tracking the institutionalization of the fight against informational warfare. The Moldovan government established the Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation in July 2023 and also adopted a new National Security Strategy in November 2023, which, for the first time, explicitly identified Russia as a threat to national security. (Ibid) Furthermore, Moldova has actively barred pro-Russian parties from participating in elections. In June 2023 the Constitutional Court of Moldova banned the pro-Russian ȘOR Party and over the course of the next two years other parties with pro-Russian leanings, (Mazur, 2025) such as Moldova Mare, have faced significant legal challenges. (Durbala, 2025) Perhaps as a counter-reaction to the multitude of measures taken by Moldova to steady the ship and regain the initiative in its fight against Russian disinformation, the 2024 presidential elections as well as the European Union referendum, which were both held on 20 October 2024, were marked by a level of foreign interference, including the buying of votes, organized protests and cyberattacks, which has been characterized as unprecedented in Moldova's history. (Kieff & Bandura, 2025) There are indications that Russia may have spent approximately €200 million for the purpose of influencing the election results. (Ibid) However, the Russian efforts of derailing Moldova from its pro-EU path did not pay off given that Europhile president Maia Sandu was reelected and Moldovans voted in favor of enshrining the aim of joining the European Union in the country's constitution, albeit on both occasions the pro-EU sides won by a slim margin. (Ibid) The actions of the authorities in Romania and Moldova demonstrate that pro-EU political forces may be entering a more hardline and pragmatic mode, with security- and identity-related concerns seemingly gaining ground at the expense of commitments to liberal values and political inclusion, with Russia (due to creating an environment in which elevated perceptions of military threats are the rule rather than the exception) no longer in a strong position to play up its soft power and accuse the pro-Western crowd of violating its own democratic credentials.

4.CONCLUSION

Russia's war against Ukraine has entrenched the perception that it no longer seems willing to tolerate even the illusion of choice when it comes to certain countries in its orbit trying to redefine their geopolitical alignments. The Russian Federation has frequently been depicted as possessing a wealth of experience with regard to orchestrating disinformation campaigns and when it comes to Ukraine in particular, Russian influence has historically always found ways to reestablish itself, (Yermolenko, 2020) though due to the Putin regime's onslaught on the country this door appears to have now been closed for generations to come. However, the evaporation of many aspects of Russia's soft power may have repercussions far beyond the borders of Ukraine – in addition to the decrease in its ideological appeal and the increased challenges when it comes to its narratives gaining currency among the ordinary citizens of other European countries, politicians in sovereign states that are part of Russia's unfriendly countries list are likely to feel empowered to use the full range of legal tools against pro-Russian parties because of the greater ease with which the widespread promotion of Kremlin talking points can plausibly be sold as posing a genuine security risk to the wider society.

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