

Russia's Soft Power Discourse: Identity, Status and the Attraction of Power

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The article adopts an interpretive approach to explore Russian soft power as a discourse that has emerged in response to Joseph Nye's hegemonic narrative of soft power. Russian elites are drawn to soft power for status and influence in the international system. Their discourse is influenced by Russia's dual great power identity shaped by a 'love-hate' relationship with the West. When Russia fails to meet the hegemonic criteria for soft power and recognition, it resorts to a countervailing discourse that claims soft power and great power status in opposition to the West and its hegemonic discourse.

Keywords: soft power; Russia; great power; identity; status

Introduction

Russian soft power has recently become the subject of research among scholars of Russia, but the analysis so far has remained limited in scope and theoretical conceptualisation. Two major trends in the literature stand out: a preoccupation with the use of Russian soft power in the post-Soviet space, and a focus on the assessment and effectiveness of Russia's soft power as a tool of its foreign policy (Dolinskiy, 2013; Makarychev, 2011; Parshin, 2013; Rukavishnikov, 2010; Saari, 2014; Simons, 2014). The latter approach adopts the rationalist lens of Joseph Nye's original concept of soft power to evaluate Russia's soft power performance and capabilities. This assessment exercise has often resulted in an analytical orthodoxy with conclusions about Russia's ultimate failure to produce soft power (Avgerinos, 2009). Otherwise, there has been a mixed verdict on the effectiveness of Russian soft power, following tentative attempts to revisit the notion of attraction beyond the criteria set by Nye (Leonova, 2013; Kudors, 2010; Orttung, 2010; Tsygankov, 2006). Either way, these conclusions based on rationalist understandings of soft power often seem to lead to an analytical dead end. This is in large part due to the overall conceptual and practical difficulty of measuring (soft) power and its effective use (Baldwin, 1979; Rukavishnikov, 2010, pp. 78–79), as well as the often-overlooked issue of the subject/recipient of (Russian) soft power and the lack of its conceptualisation (Lock, 2010).

This article aims to move away from the rationalist approach to soft power and the task to 'objectively' measure it. In examining Russian soft power it adopts an interpretive methodology to understand why Russian policy makers are interested in soft power, and how this interest has played out in the official discourse in Russo-Western relations. By drawing on the social concept of 'hegemony' and applying a constructivist/post-structuralist approach to soft power, I consider the latter as a hegemonic discourse that produces power and relations of power of its own. The narrative of the importance of soft power in world politics and the articulation of a particular set of soft power criteria determine who gets to enjoy power and

status in international relations. With the US, and the West, at the top of the hegemonic structure, other countries have to situate themselves in relation to, and in interaction with, the hegemon and its discourse if they are to exercise soft power. Russia finds itself in this position, too. This article thus makes a contribution to the literature on Russian soft power in the following ways. First, it introduces Russian soft power as a discourse generated by Russian elites in pursuit of power and status for their country in international affairs. Second, it adopts a relational approach to power. If Russian policy makers strive for (soft) power and status, they have to meet the criteria set by the hegemon and have Russian soft power operate in the West. The Russian discourse on soft power situates itself in reference to its hegemonic counterpart, from which it takes some of its characteristics. But the target/recipient of Russian soft power is not only the West as the hegemon, but also the West as Russia's Other. While the latter fact overlaps with Russia's general desire to fit into the hegemonic structure of soft power, it also disrupts it. Russia's perceived inability to attain status and influence from the Other eventually pushes Russian elites to reframe their soft power discourse in more accommodating and ultimately competitive terms. The hegemon and its soft power discourse are resisted, while Russia's global status and power are recognised as a given. Thus, I argue that Russia's great power identity, contextualised by the country's dual 'love-hate' relationship with the West, has contributed to the duality of Russia's discourse on soft power, when both accepting and rejecting the hegemonic discourse has been seen as a sign of great power status and (soft) power.

The article will begin by approaching the concept of 'soft power' as a hegemonic discourse, as discussed and critiqued by constructivist and critical theory scholars. It then examines how Russia's great power aspirations, embedded in its national identity, have shaped Russian policy makers' dual discourse on soft power in the West. Both parts of the discourse – one accepting the hegemonic West's criteria for obtaining soft power and one opposing them – will be discussed in due order. Conclusions and final observations will then follow.

Hegemony and soft power as a discourse

The term 'soft power' has been used widely by academics and practitioners to refer to a phenomenon in world politics that has become increasingly important in the post-Cold War period: the power of attraction (Nye, 2004; 2011). Policy makers in many countries have seized on the idea and attempted to utilise it as a foreign policy tool. The creator of the concept, Joseph Nye (2004), has simply called it 'the means to success' in world politics. He emphasises the growing importance of national values, ideas, domestic and foreign policies that make up countries' attraction, which is instrumental in helping states achieve foreign policy goals and therefore maximise their power *vis-à-vis* others. For Nye (2004, p. 5), attraction is the currency of power that can bring about change in the policy behaviour of other states because the latter naturally 'want to do' what they otherwise would not do. Nye (2004, pp. 11 and 75) also points out that the US, and the developed nations of the West in general, are most capable of soft power as their national attraction is based on 'universal' values.

Despite the clear-cut explanation given above, the analytical utility of 'soft power' has been contested. The term betrays a number of internal tensions in its conceptualisation, which has prompted scholars to analyse what this *representation* of soft power does. In other words, it is imperative to study the performative role of soft power in creating the reality it describes, and hence the discursive power implicit in the concept (Diez, 2005, p. 626;

Guzzini, 2005). The next section will present an overview of existing literature and critique of soft power as a discourse, drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'cultural hegemony'.

The problematique of soft power and the discourse of 'soft power'

A major tension in the concept of soft power has been the problematic nature of attraction in world politics. The issue arises from Joseph Nye's (2004, pp. 5 and 31–32; 2011, pp. 13 and 16) simultaneous treatment of attraction as both a natural, or given, thing and as the result of external influence or indirect manipulation, such as persuasion, co-option or agenda-setting that make one's interests pose as those of others (Bially Mattern, 2005, p. 591; Fan, 2008, p. 148; Lukes, 2005a, p. 490). Nye uses both ways of conceiving of soft power interchangeably. Attraction as a social mechanism in interstate relations is hard to identify due to the obscure nature of cause and effect, and multiple reasons that can facilitate one single action (such as the fall of the Soviet Union) (Fan, 2008, p. 153; Hall, 2010, pp. 198–207; Layne, 2010, pp. 53–55). Scholars have been preoccupied with the question of how soft power actually works, whether it targets policy makers or populations, and under what circumstances (Layne, 2010, pp. 56–57). Persuasion or agenda-setting, on the other hand, are arguably more amenable to tracing as they can be contextualised in instances of bilateral co-operation against instances of non-co-operation between the same states. Nye (2004, pp. 15–16 and 44; 2011, pp. 21 and 99) implicitly endorses this when he emphasises the relational nature of soft power, which needs to account for context, scope and domain (Geiger, 2010, pp. 89 and 101). Therefore, the premise about the 'natural', immutable character of attraction between states is less tenable; attraction rather amounts to the ability to persuade in a particular context at a particular time.

The problematic nature of attraction is largely due to Nye's similarly dual treatment of national values and culture that underpin soft power. His conceptualisation of values is torn between a universalistic standpoint and a relational approach. Nye (2004, p. 11) has repeatedly emphasised the 'universal', and therefore enduring and self-evident, attraction of American (and, by implication, Western) neoliberal ideas and ideals. But, on the other hand, his thinking on soft power has also strayed towards specifying when and where soft power has the greatest chance of success: when countries have 'shared values' or where countries' values are attractive to others (Nye, 2004, pp. 11, 61 and 64; 2011, p. 87). Sometimes values do not matter at all, as there are instances of co-operation on the basis of interests in the absence of common values; conversely, countries that share particular values can compete, including in soft power (Layne, 2010, pp. 62–63; Nye, 2004, pp. 82–83). All of the above points to the contingent nature of values and norms, which takes us back to the idea of persuasion and the ability to 'frame the issue' depending on the context. What Nye calls 'attraction' based on particular values is in fact an act of persuasion, when at a particular point values can be made to appear more attractive and thus play a greater role in making others take a particular course of action, such as agreement to co-operate (Bially Mattern, 2005, p. 594).

Co-option in Joseph Nye's (2011, pp. 13 and 16) conception of soft power bears a close resemblance to Steven Lukes' (2005b, pp. 13 and 28) 'third dimension of power' – the ability to shape others' preferences and beliefs to one's advantage through generation of consent that advances one's interests. In the same way, Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall's (2005, pp. 53–54) notion of 'structural power' bears relation to how co-option-cum-soft power operates:

it shapes others' 'self-understanding' and 'interpretive system' through production of particular values and interests, which determine others' behaviour and choice of actions. The attraction of values is therefore socially constructed and is a result of a 'power politics of identity' and a struggle over ideas that form part of social relations (Bially Mattern, 2005, p. 611; Zahran and Ramos, 2010, p. 24). Although Nye (2004, pp. 7 and 31; 2011, p. 97) invokes a 'marketplace for ideas' and a 'competition for attractiveness, legitimacy and credibility', his invariable emphasis on the 'universal' attraction of American/Western liberal values appears to be an act of persuasion in itself; Nye has made 'soft power' a part of the struggle over ideas. The discourse is best understood through the prism of Antonio Gramsci's cultural hegemony: domination of one social group over others via generation of consent and compliance around prevailing (hegemonic) values framed in universal terms, and the resultant submission of the consenting to thus constructed social order (Cox, 1983, p. 168; Lukes, 2005b, pp. 7–8; Zahran and Ramos, 2010, pp. 21–23). A hegemony (in the form of a 'historic bloc') is sustained through accommodation of subordinate interests and dispensation of public goods to subordinate groups (Lukes, 2005b, p. 9). Similarly, 'soft power' supports American ideational hegemony on a global scale by promoting US leadership based on 'universal' ideals (Geiger, 2010, pp. 101–102; Zahran and Ramos, 2010, p. 14). Peter van Ham (2007, p. 47) thus enquires if the US might be called an 'empire by default'. Moreover, the discourse also determines the boundaries of 'normal' in the given hegemony by encouraging, or eliciting, a particular 'appropriate' behaviour from those wishing to have soft power – namely adherence to the 'universal' neoliberal norms and practices. 'Soft power' thus acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy as it arguably creates a reality it describes, that is countries with 'shared' American values and willing to co-operate with the hegemon.

On the other hand, 'soft power' is markedly discriminatory and hierarchical: the discourse is meaningful as long as it distinguishes between soft power and 'non-soft power' (i.e. a lack of soft power elsewhere). 'Soft power' makes sense in perceived conditions of inequality – so long as it favours some countries over others (those with no or little soft power), which are deemed inferior. In other words, 'othering' is central to the discourse of soft power. In this sense, soft power is close to Barnett and Duvall's (2005, pp. 55–57) concept of 'productive power'; it produces two distinct country identities: 'soft power nations' and 'non-soft power nations' (Glasser, 2010; Yasushi and McConnell, 2008).

Joseph Nye's insistence on the natural appeal of US/Western values and policies to the rest of the world is not surprising given the ascendancy of Western neoliberal ideas in the post-Cold War period (Lukes, 2005b, p. 10; Scott-Smith, 2010, pp. 167–168), and their consolidation through global institutions such as the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). 'Soft power' in this regard is close to notions like 'the unipolar moment' or 'the end of history'. Nye's firm belief in the power of American soft power perhaps also stems from the implicit messianic, or 'civilising', character of the US polity as a whole, when one nation's ideals are seen and promoted as *a priori* superior and noble (Diez, 2005, p. 621). The discourse of soft power and the American hegemony, ideational and constitutive as they are, thus rest on very material foundations that they, in turn, serve to reinforce global-neoliberal institutions (Barnett and Duvall, 2005, pp. 63–66; Geiger, 2010, p. 88; Ikenberry, 2001). Nye's both conceptual and policy-driven engagement with soft power has been viewed by some scholars as an attempt to bring US hegemony back on track to multilateral co-operation, and thereby reassert American hegemony and legitimacy after George W. Bush's damaging unilateralism (note the prescriptive tone of Nye's works) (Layne, 2010, pp. 58–60 and 67; Zahran and Ramos, 2010, p. 27). Nye (2004, pp. 10–11 and 65; 2011, p. 18) pays special attention to

institutions and ‘networks’ of the hegemonic liberal order that are meant to foster co-operation but also secure US leadership through agenda-setting and preference-shaping (Geiger, 2010, p. 91). He is also keen to point out the role of the US in providing global public goods (Nye, 2004, p. 61; 2011, pp. 214 and 220–222), thus confirming its status as the ‘indispensable nation’ – a statement consistent with Gramsci’s hegemony. However, whereas American hegemony and soft power locked in global institutions are seen by liberal institutionalists rather in a positive light (the ‘benevolent hegemon’, after all, serves the global public good and engages in co-operation), for critical scholars it is a negative feature of international politics that perpetuates material inequalities between powerful developed states, on the one hand, and developing (subordinate) states, on the other (Cox, 1983).

The power of Joseph Nye’s discourse is remarkable if one is to consider how many academics, experts, journalists and policy makers have come to embrace the concept in the past decade or so (Bially Mattern, 2005, p. 589; Kearn, 2011, p. 65). The attraction of ‘soft power’ arguably contributes to US attraction and hegemony as a whole – a topic that invokes post-structuralists’ concerns over the relationship between knowledge and power. To employ Nye’s terminology, ‘soft power’ has co-opted many not only in the developed Western states, quite predictably, but also in countries with no or little soft power by hegemonic standards, like China or Russia (Nye, 2013). As Gary Rawnsley (2012, p. 124) put it, ‘soft power has become the latest fashionable catch-all term that all governments must claim to do, otherwise they are out of step with the times’. As the hegemonic discourse exercises the power of interpretation and representation, countries wishing to have soft power are expected to meet the hegemonic ‘standards’ in order to ‘qualify’. Relations within the ‘soft power’ structure are hierarchical, and the success of aspiring nations in joining the club of ‘soft power powers’ will depend on how well they will meet the neoliberal criteria set up by the hegemon.

We shall now turn to the case of Russia to examine how its policy makers have responded to the appeal of ‘soft power’. Like many countries outside of the developed Western world, Russia has to situate its own discourse on soft power in relation to the hegemon’s. I argue below that Russia’s dual great power identity, rooted in the country’s age-old ‘love–hate’ relationship with the West, has impacted on how Russian leaders approach soft power and formulate relevant policies.

Russia’s soft power discourse

Russian elites have been attracted to ‘soft power’ since the late 2000s, when the term entered the official discourse (Lavrov, 2008). This interest stems from the promise of status and influence that soft power holds in the twenty-first century as a smart, non-coercive and potentially effective foreign policy tool. Konstantin Kosachev (2012f; 2012d, 2012g), head of Russia’s major soft power agency *Rosstrudnichestvo* and a key figure in Russia’s public diplomacy circles, has emphasised on several occasions the need for Russia to learn to effectively utilise instruments of soft power ‘if we want to see [it] among the world’s most powerful nations’. Thus, as a (would-be) great power, Russia cannot afford to ignore soft power and considers it imperative to use it in its foreign policy, especially in Western countries, where it has encountered a serious image problem.

Russia’s concern with its soft power in the hegemonic West (Europe and the US) is due to the latter’s role as Russia’s Other in shaping its great power identity (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010, pp. 79–80; Neumann, 1996, 2008; Neumann and Pouliot, 2011): the hegemon’s recognition of Russia’s soft power capabilities would grant it much-needed international

status and approval. Russian leaders thus have to accept the hegemon's soft power criteria in order to obtain recognition. However, Russia's great power status is also known to have been asserted through opposition or in defiance of the Other (Pipes, 2009), when the West has denied Russia acceptance (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010, pp. 90–91). This other side to Russia's great power identity has also had an impact on Russian leaders' approach to soft power.

The analysis below will show how the duality of Russia's great power identity, shaped by complex relations with the West, has affected the Russian discourse on soft power. On the one hand, part of the discourse has sought to adopt elements of its hegemonic counterpart; on the other, the Russian discourse has been formulated differently or in opposition to the hegemon's as a result of the perceived failure of Russian soft power in Western countries. Resisting the West and its soft power narrative has thus become the other way for Russia to claim soft power and assert great powerhood.

'Co-operative' Russian soft power: gaining status by accepting the hegemon

Russia's adoption of parts of the hegemonic discourse on soft power is manifested in a number of instances. Most prominent is the definition and understanding of soft power by Russian policy makers, who echo Joseph Nye's original idea. For example, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (2008) once defined 'soft power' as 'the ability to influence the world with the attraction of one's civilisation, culture, foreign policy'. He also includes in a country's attraction toolkit, as do his colleagues, a strong civil society, participation in international aid programmes, and achievements in education and health care (Karasin, 2010; Lavrov, 2012a; Mukhametshin, 2011). Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev (2012) refers to 'soft power' as 'a special resource of global leadership which is directly related to human potential', and says that, in order to make use of this resource, Russia should 'create decent conditions for creative endeavour'. Head of *Rossotrudnichestvo* Konstantin Kosachev (2012c; 2012e; 2012a) once stated that he shares Nye's interpretation of soft power: Russia's image should be 'naturally attractive' and secure others' support 'in a completely voluntary and conscious manner'. Thus, Russia should set an example for others to follow 'in economic and political development, in finding solutions to pressing modern issues'. Kosachev (2012d) acknowledges the self-evident attraction of the liberal ideas of freedom, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. He also differentiates between soft power and propaganda (Kosachev, 2014c).

Another strand of Russia's pro-hegemonic discourse is the narrative of 'catch-up' and emulation of Western soft power practices: in order to excel in soft power, Russia needs to follow the 'global trends' and keep up with the 'world leaders' (Kosachev, 2012h; 2013a; Medvedev, 2012). Western nations serve as a primary reference point for the Russian elite as they provide criteria against which to assess Russia's own soft power capabilities. For example, in speaking about the setting up of two soft power institutions in Russia, the Russian Council for Foreign Affairs and the Gorchakov Fund for the Support of Public Diplomacy, Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin (2010) stresses that they are being established 'fully in line with modern requirements and the practices of [Russia's] key international partners' – i.e. Western states (Kosachev, 2013b). Konstantin Kosachev (2012c; 2012e; 2013c) often cites Western soft power institutions, such as USAID, Goethe Institut, the British Council and Alliance Française, as models from which Russia can learn. Other Western soft power practices are invoked as well. For instance, there has been a call in Russia's public diplomacy circles to

engage Russian civil society and civic organisations (nongovernmental organisations) in the country's soft power activities. Russian policy makers have also seized on the idea of harnessing the potential of digital diplomacy and social networks for Russia's soft power purposes (Kosachev, 2012a). Finally, there has been an increased interest in the role of development assistance in advancing Russian soft power – another apparent attempt to follow 'the world's leading nations' (Kosachev, 2013a).

Russia is keen to employ soft power in the West in a way that would facilitate understanding and a sense of affinity between the two sides. The intention is reflected in various official documents and statements that stress the need to project an 'objective' and 'truthful' image of Russia in Western societies. Russian policy makers are concerned that Russia's image in the West is unjustifiably distorted due to, among other things, deep-seated stereotypes that perpetuate a 'negative perception inertia' (Kosachev, 2014b; 2012c). They seek to rectify the situation by providing more – positive – information about Russia and by explaining its position on various international and domestic issues. The emphasis is on explaining and the addition of information for the sake of balance, and any intentions of whitewash or embellishment are decidedly dismissed (Kosachev, 2014d; 2012h; 2013d). Konstantin Kosachev (2014b; 2012h) further stresses that Russia is not different from any other country, with its own issues as well as positive features, and that 'there are not so many problems in Russia in order to ... single it out and put it in a special category'. According to him, the latter occurs due to the 'presumption of guilt' the Western states exercise against Russia, when negative information is inflated on purpose (Kosachev, 2012h). However, Russia is no Soviet Union; it is 'a completely different country' that has embraced democratic principles and universal values (Kosachev, 2012h; 2013c). Thus, Kosachev (2012b) concludes that, as soon as an objective image of Russia in the West becomes the norm based on the above realisation, 'things will automatically get better'.

'Competitive' Russian soft power: gaining status by resisting the hegemon

Despite the above pronouncements and Russia's seeming embrace of the hegemonic narratives of soft power, it appears that policy makers in Russia are well aware of the practical limitations of such an embrace. Ongoing Western criticism of the domestic situation in terms of democracy and Russia's invariably negative image in the West push its leaders to look for other ways to reconcile Russia's soft power ambitions with the capabilities at hand. The desire to use soft power is driven by the sense of entitlement as a great power, and the efforts to that end – by the feeling of urgency to 'catch up' with other (great) powers (Lavrov, 2013). Russia effectively reverses the logic of 'soft power': instead of earning great power status as a result of acquiring soft power, it lays claim to soft power automatically, as a consequence of its ostensibly obvious great powerhood. Thus, the Russian discourse on soft power has exhibited new, 'indigenous' characteristics that part company with the hegemonic discourse, sometimes in a very radical way.

One such characteristic is the effort to shift the focus from political sources of soft power (democracy and human rights) to cultural ones, and to amplify the latter. Russia's public diplomacy officials stress the universality of Russian high culture (Kosachev, 2012f; 2012g) and count on Russia's 'cultural presence' abroad to aid its soft power (Chesnokov, 2012; Kontsepsiya Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 2013; Lavrov, 2012c, p. 14; Putin, 2012a). The argument is as follows: when it comes to soft power, a great nation like Russia cannot be judged merely on the basis of political values such as democracy; Russia represents

a different national setting, where culture plays a more important role as a soft power asset (Kosachev, 2012a). Culture therefore seems to be a good enough reason for Russian elites to claim soft power.

Another 'tactic' Russian policy makers resort to is opposite to the previous one. Instead of magnifying Russia's soft power assets, they downplay those of the West. An example of this approach is annual reports on human rights violations in Western countries compiled by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID), which are meant to detract from Western liberal values and their 'universal' attraction. Western soft power thus gets a dressing-down (Muradov, 2013). This exercise accomplishes two tasks for Russia: it makes Russian soft power in the democracy domain look better by comparison, and it makes it easier for Russia to pursue soft power on its own terms. Konstantin Kosachev (2012a), for example, argues that Western values, such as democracy, cannot be blatantly promoted and applied to other countries with diverse historical and cultural traditions. Moreover, it is wrong to speak of one Western democracy suitable for all – there can be different democratic models that would account for others' national peculiarities (Karasin, 2010; Kosachev, 2012a; Lavrov, 2012b). Russia happens to offer one such model of development to the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Kosachev, 2012a; Muradov, 2013). Besides, in an interesting twist of narrative, Russian officials argue that the universality of democratic ideas is so obvious and undeniable that it is wrong for any country, including those in the West, to 'monopolise' the right to interpret these ideas in order to promote their soft power (Kosachev, 2012a). In a sense, Russia strips democratic ideas of their Western origins and interpretive utility, thus making discussions of them an altogether pointless endeavour. This enables Russia to move debates around soft power safely away from its original underpinnings. Interestingly, Russian policy makers even implicitly suggest that their country could do even better than Western societies with regard to 'the current [democratic] standards', by coming up with 'a kind of global humanistic modernisation [project]' (Kosachev, 2012f) and 'innovative' ideas in the name of humanism, progress and the human spirit.

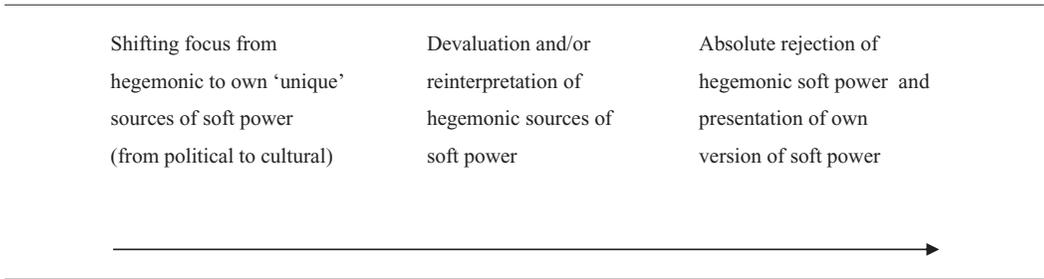
The extreme example of Russia's departure from the hegemonic discourse of soft power has been the depiction of Western soft power as a malign and manipulative tool used by Western countries to further their geopolitical ends (Kontseptsiya Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 2013; Kosachev, 2012f; Putin, 2012a). The Russian discourse on soft power has assumed a hostile and confrontational tone in the past two and a half years, which has been caused by a worsening of relations between Russia and the West in the run-up to and during Vladimir Putin's third term as President. Growing Western criticism of Russia's domestic policies and the volatility of the international system caused by the Arab Spring have combined to produce a mode of thinking in Russia that increasingly views soft power originating in the West as a threat to the Russian state and its national interests. Joseph Nye's soft power is believed to have instigated the supposedly democratic revolutions in the Arab world, aimed at regime change (Lavrov, 2012b; Putin, 2012a). This understanding of soft power has been reinforced by Russia's own experience of 'colour revolutions' in the CIS a decade earlier (Kosachev, 2012f), which saw its strategic interests suffer as a result. Presently, the negative accusatory perception of Western soft power among Russian elites is shaped by Russia's own democratic protests of 2011–2012, and the ongoing political crisis in Ukraine (Kosachev, 2014a; Lavrov, 2014) – both of which are seen as having been engineered by the West to undermine Russia's national interests.

In the eyes of Russian policy makers, soft power serves as a cover-up for Western interference in the internal affairs of other states under the guise of moral behaviour and the promotion of liberal democratic values (Muradov, 2013; Putin, 2012a). In other words, Western interests are presented as values (Kosachev, 2014a). Russian leaders consider soft power to be a political instrument of indirect control and manipulation of foreign populations (Putin, 2012a) by means of Western or Western-sponsored local nongovernmental organisations propagating liberal ideas (Kosachev, 2014a; Putin, 2012b, p. 11). In 2012 soon-to-be-President Vladimir Putin (2012a) even gave soft power the epithet 'illegal' and called Western civil groups 'pseudo-NGOs' who engage in 'uncivilised lobbying'. New information and communication technologies (ICTs) and social networks, referred to in the official discourse as 'facebook technologies' (Kosachev, 2012e), are also deemed culpable in spreading harmful soft power from the West. As a result, Nye's soft power has been equated with propaganda, psychological warfare and information war. Russian officials believe that in contemporary world affairs popular unrest is an act of 'political engineering' aided by soft power (Gaydazhieva, 2013; Kontseptsiya Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 2013), in which the grievances of protesting masses against national governments, and demands for democracy, no matter how genuine or warranted, are always exploited by Western policy makers. From such a perspective, discontented populations taking part in the revolutions or protests have no agency and no meaningful role to play as they are bound to be manipulated by the West.

As Western soft power is perceived to be a threat to sovereign states, including Russia, the rejection of the hegemonic discourse of soft power by Russian elites has been accompanied by an equally powerful counter-hegemonic soft power narrative. Russian leaders claim to offer a more just and honest version of soft power – an attraction based on the Westphalian world order, in which the values of sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs are properly safeguarded (Kosachev, 2012a). Whereas Western soft power and attraction rest on internal national characteristics (democracy, respect for human rights, market economy), the Russian discourse of soft power is directed outwards and focuses on the realm of the external – the international system and interstate relations. The attraction of Russian soft power consists therefore in 'sealing' the domestic sphere off from the external influences of damaging Western soft power, and in fostering among states 'value-free', unconditional co-operation based on mutual respect and international law (Kosachev, 2012b). Russian leaders thus believe they perform the noble role of making the international system more 'democratic', 'fair' and stable (Kosachev, 2012a; Lavrov, 2012b; 2013) – ultimately, safe from the West's hegemonic tendencies as it tries to preserve the neo-liberal global order by means of 'illegal' soft power.

The role of 'defender' of sovereign interests and a more secure international order in its discourse on soft power seems to provide Russia with an aura of much-needed great powerhood. Russia's sense of entitlement to great power status, and thus to soft power, finds its fullest expression in the assertive manner in which Russian policy makers repel Western criticism. According to them, Russia's negative image in the West and the lack of soft power are due to the Western leaders' deliberate attempts to discredit Russia as a powerful geopolitical rival (Kosachev, 2014a; 2014b; 2014c). The fact that Russia is constantly criticised by the West appears to Russian elites to be the ultimate indication that Russia is indeed a great power that poses a serious challenge to American hegemony. Therefore, just as its great powerhood, Russia's soft power is believed to have been artificially downgraded through 'unfair competition' (Kosachev, 2014a; 2014b).

Figure 1: Russia's gradual rejection of the hegemonic discourse of soft power



The departure of Russia's discourse of soft power from the Western hegemonic discourse can be illustrated as a progression from mild forms of resistance to more assertive ones, as opposition to the hegemon grows (see Figure 1).¹ The final stage of open resistance to hegemonic soft power is manifested in confrontational rhetoric that calls for the need for Russia to use its own soft power against Western soft power in order to defend its national interests. According to Konstantin Kosachev (2012h), Russia's goal is not 'to be liked at any cost' when it comes to safeguarding its national interests, including with its soft power. The current international crisis around Ukraine has been in line with this approach: Ukraine is viewed as a 'battlefield' where Russian and Western soft power clash (Kosachev, 2014b). Thus, the discourse of soft power in Russia is increasingly framed in geopolitical and *realpolitik* terms (Lavrov, 2014). Expressions like 'our rivals' (the West) and '[soft power] parity', or 'parity in political technologies', keep appearing in the official discourse (Kosachev, 2014a; 2014d; 2012e; Medvedev, 2012).

Conclusion

This article has sought to approach the subject of Russian soft power in two important ways. First, it has treated Russian soft power as a discourse launched by Russian elites in response to the 'rise' of the soft power discourse in the hegemonic West, which portrays soft power as a vital component of national strength and status in modern world politics. Second, it has demonstrated the importance of looking at soft power as a relationship, which, in the case of Russia, plays out in the interaction of the Russian discourse on soft power with the hegemonic one, driven by the need for the Russian state to obtain status and influence. However, the task of acquiring status is affected by Russia's dual great power identity shaped by its relations with the Other, the West. When Russia cannot gain status through recognition of its soft power in the hegemonic West, it resorts to asserting its great power standing and soft power on its own terms, in opposition to the hegemon and its soft power 'standards'. Ongoing criticism of Russia by the West and a deterioration in relations between the two, when Russia's national interests are perceived to be deliberately ignored and Russia – denied due respect, lead to a hurt ego and a sense of insecurity. The latter ultimately pushes policy makers in Russia to frame Russian soft power in geopolitical terms, as a counterforce to the West and its detrimental soft power, meant to defend Russian national interests.

The question remains as to whether the second facet of 'Russian soft power', as it is framed in hostile *realpolitik* terms, could indeed obtain recognition and status in the West. It appears

that recognition of Russian soft power by Western countries, and consequently an improvement in Russia's damaged image, are contingent upon Russia meeting the hegemonic criteria for soft power – namely liberal democratic values and practices. Ultimately, this will also depend on the US and Western states' willingness to 'modify' the current hegemonic neoliberal order so as to accommodate and recognise the status and interests of 'outsiders' as equals (Ikenberry, 2009). Unless Russia indeed conforms to the requirements of hegemonic 'soft power', it might well try to gain recognition on its own terms, through 'social creativity' acceptable to the hegemon (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010). Otherwise, at present, as distrust between Russia and the West grows, Russia's discourse of soft power seems more likely to remain skewed towards its second, competitive, facet. In this case, Russian leaders might try to form a 'camp' of like-minded countries to oppose the Western hegemonic order, as the basis of Russia's soft power in the future (Ambrosio, 2010). Ultimately, the rhetoric of Russian officials that relies heavily on denigrating the hegemon and blaming it for Russia's soft power failures is highly unlikely to elicit recognition from the said hegemon. The confrontational aspect of Russia's soft power discourse is further perpetuated by its own vicious circle logic, when, in response to purportedly insidious and manipulative Western soft power, Russian policy makers adopt policies based on this faulty perception of soft power. A telling example is the creation of Russian governmental nongovernmental organisations (GONGOs) tasked with conducting civic diplomacy. Such an approach would only serve to further alienate the West and delay its recognition of Russia's soft power.

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Note

1 It should be noted that this departure is not absolute, in the sense that both facets of the Russian discourse on soft power – 'co-operative' and 'competitive' – exist at the same time. Inadvertently or not, Russian elites have been ambivalent toward soft power. However, over the past three years, the latter, 'competitive' strand of the discourse, and especially its most confrontational component, have become more prominent, pushing the 'co-operative' discourse into the background. The turning points were the Arab Spring 2010–2012, Russia's own protests against the government in 2011–2012, and the recent international crisis around Ukraine 2013–2014. All of these events are attributed to the malevolent workings of Western soft power. Perhaps President Putin has set the 'trend' for the emergence of the extreme 'competitive' discourse with the publication of his article on international affairs in *Moskovskiy Novosti* in February 2012, where he explicitly called soft power 'illegal'. Thus, whether Russian policy makers believe this or not, such attitudes to soft power have become a (geo-)political 'necessity' or even a 'fashion'.

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