

The Balkan Playground: Eastern "Soft" Power Coming, Western Not Leaving

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Abstract

Since 1990, when the American political scientist Joseph Nye elaborated the term of soft power for the first time (Nye, 1990), the concept has been hailed, criticized or neglected, but, in due time positioned itself as crucial component of a country's foreign policy. Consecutive US administrations were the leading actor in the field, alongside the European Union with its gravity model of democratization (Emerson & Nouncheva, 2004). When it comes to applying soft power, the Russian Federation is a latecomer, regardless of the long, ideology-based record of its predecessor, the USSR. During the political, economic and financial crises of the past decade, the European Union was absorbed by internal deliberations, while the United States reoriented itself towards Asia. The freshly opened strategic vacuum in the Balkans was exploited by Moscow which approached the region with its own version of soft power, combined with political propaganda. However, after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the proxy war in Ukraine, the Western Alliance (US and EU) returned to the Balkans with the aim of repositioning itself by confronting Russian influence. It could be argued that despite perceptions created in some sections of the western media, the redoubled Russian efforts in the Balkans have not succeeded in deposing the West from dominating the region. In the years ahead, Russia, most likely, will achieve little more than being seen as an obstructionist force, while the West will remain in the driving seat relying on its vast and diversified reservoir of soft power.

Keywords: soft power, propaganda, Western alliance, Russia, the Balkans, democratic values.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, in the words of Brzezinski (cited in Nye, 2004), Joseph Nye offered a substantial contribution to the understanding of international relations by expanding the concept of soft power he invented in 1990. In his book, Nye convincingly argued that it took decades to realize that power might come in many guises and that soft power is a form of power. As hard power rests on coercion, soft power or the ability to shape the attitudes of others rests on the attractiveness of one's culture or values (Nye, 2004, pp. 7-11). The soft power of states and organizations depends primarily on three resources: their cultural and political values and their foreign policies which have to be seen as legitimate in order to have moral impact and authority (Nye, 2004, p. 11).

Long before the concept of soft power was introduced in the dictionary of international politics; it was alive and applied by various actors during the bipolar world of the Cold War. It is safe to say, that in the end, the United States won the Cold war not only because it had been the strongest in military or economic terms, but also, because it prevailed in the third dimension - soft power (Nye, 2004, p. 12).

This is far from concluding that hard power is irreversibly archived in the museums of history. In applying soft power the gravest mistake would be to regard it as a panacea for all problems, or as a replacement for hard power (Nielsen, 2013, p. 727). The interplay between soft and hard power is still frequently required in many different political contexts, but, with wars and conflicts increasingly viewed as being unacceptable by the general public, influence in the modern information age will depend on soft power tools more than ever.

In the next sections we will analyze, in general, the understanding, applicability, and reservoirs of soft power of two parts of the Western alliance (the US and EU) and of the Russian Federation, and their specific potential to project influence in the Balkans.

Western Soft Power: the EU and US Capabilities and Prospects

Since its inception in 1957, and, especially after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the European Union's soft power was central to its self-identification (Vogel, 2018, p. 2). Former Commissioner for External Relations, Chris Patten once even described EU soft power as a "weapon of mass attraction" (Nielsen, 2013, p. 730). At the end of the Cold War almost all former communist countries declared joining the EU as their strategic goal and all were ready to go through the challenging negotiation process in order to become part of the organization (Nye, 2004, p. 80). Alongside its attractive culture, and political and economic systems at home, EU soft power stems from its foreign policy position on human rights, international law, global warming, massive participation in peacekeeping operations and overseas development assistance to countries in need (Nye, 2004, p. 83).

A Specific aspect of European soft power is that the most affluent members of the European Union have considerable soft power resources at a national level, whilst the organization, as such, possesses its own as well. The first global index for measuring soft power for three years in a row confirms that six members of the EU: France, UK, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark are among the top 10 performers in the world (USC, 2017, pp. 40-41). The "big three" in the EU - France, the UK and Germany have, for years been among the top five in the Nation Brands Index (GFK, 2017), which should not come as a surprise because their systematic promotional activities date back to the 19th century (Davis & Melissen, 2013, p. 13). Comparing some aspects of soft power, France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy, taken individually, outrank many other nations when counting the number of Nobel Prize winners, the number of foreign tourists, applications for political asylum, Internet websites hosts or a higher life expectancy (USC, 2017, pp. 40-41).

Speaking of the European Union as a whole, the organization's public diplomacy branch is a complex and massive channel for disseminating the values of the organization to at least 164 national missions and 36 international organizations accredited at its headquarter in Brussels (Davis & Melissen, 2013, p. 115). Apart from this, through the European External Action Service's delegations and missions in 140 countries, the EU promotes its soft power in several priority areas: as a development donor and facilitator of democratic transitions; through trade as an engine of change; as a promoter of human rights and as a security provider (Davis & Melissen, 2013, p. 125). Also, the EU is a leading supporter of the UN Millennium Development Goals and International Criminal Court which started as a private initiative, but is already officially supported by 123 countries (Nielsen, 2013, pp. 734-735). To summarize: when in 2012 the EU was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, it was, in essence, the Nobel Prize for its own soft power.

On the down side, several trends have challenged the basic patterns of the European architecture and have damaged the soft power of the EU as an entity: the Eurozone crises in 2011; the Greek debt and refugee crises in 2015, and Brexit in 2016, not to mention the long-standing systemic fault lines, like (the) North-South divide or the surge of far-right, far-left and populist parties (Patalakh, 2017, p. 149).

Long before the US was known as a birth place of the concept, Washington was a dominant actor in information warfare during the bipolar world. Radio Free Europe was widely regarded as the most visible and efficient propaganda tool of the Trans-Atlantic Alliance for not only disseminating news, but also Western values (Puddington, 2000). However, it was only after the dissolution of the USSR that: "American liberalism had [an] unparalleled appeal around the world" (Li, 2018). Basic features of the American political system were widely copied in virtually all former communist states, while American political scientists boasted of the "end of history", with liberal democracy as an end point of the political processes. In the period 1980-2010, the number of liberal democracies, as defined by Freedom House, grew for

approximately 50 per cent, and the number of free market economies, as ranked by Heritage Foundation, almost doubled in the same period (Li, 2018).

Despite its global reach and “impressive results”, the soft power of the United States significantly declined in 2003, in the aftermath of the Iraq war when polls confirmed that, on average, support for the US fell to 30 per cent even among its European allies (Nye, 2004, p. 44). Brzezinski said that due to the unnecessary Iraq war: “we have unfortunately delegitimized ourselves” (Brzezinski, 2012). According to the Pew Research Centre, favorable opinion about the USA on the global level is constantly in decline (Pew Research Centre, 2017). Anti-Americanism is persistently on the rise and as Luce observes: “condemnations of the US are becoming a routine” (Luce, 2018) which is not beneficial for executing the soft power capabilities of the United States. The current administration in Washington, with its official policy of “America First” is not bolstering the image of a soft power empire, but, on the contrary, is “alienating the allies and weakening links with the world” (USC, 2017, p. 11).

Russian Soft Power

Ever since the triumph of the first communist revolution, Russia as part of the USSR has possessed a significant amount of soft power leverage. At the time, it was perceived as the bearer of an ideology which aimed for a balanced distribution of resources and a morally just political community. Being on the victorious side of the Second World War, significantly boosted the positive image of the country and obscured the scale of massive breaches of human rights largely unknown outside the Kremlin walls. Nevertheless, Soviet soft power suffered serious blows after the invasions of Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the repression in Poland in 1980. In the last two decades of its existence, the inner nature of the Soviet system started slowly, but surely to rise to the surface with socialist values not being potent enough to inspire its own citizens, let alone those of other nations.

During the Gorbachev period, the country briefly recovered some of its international standing and popularity, but, that period was cut short by the dissolution of the USSR (Nye, 2004, p. 78). Interestingly, when the concept of soft power was for the first time theorized, it gained little traction in Moscow and the first book by Nye on the subject, *Bound to Lead* was not even translated into Russian. Several factors contributed to that end, but, the key factor was the Russian tradition and historic tendency to associate power with its military component. Real interest in the new concept came to the fore only after the so-called color revolutions in Georgia in 2003 and in Ukraine in 2004 penetrated into the strategic Russian interest in their “near abroad” (Herpen, 2016).

After the fall of communism, on the institutional side, the concept of soft power was first introduced during Putin’s second term as President 2004-2008, when the initiative “Russian World” targeted Russian speakers in the former republics of the USSR. But, on the level of

official documents, soft power capabilities were identified for the first time in 2013, in the document entitled "Foreign Policy Concept" (Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015, pp. 349-350).

Among the Russian political elite, there is a specific understanding of soft power which significantly differs from the original American version. According to Nye, power can be exercised in three ways – coercion, payment and attraction and only the last one is soft power. Given that their political initiatives at an international level rarely attract an audience, Russian politicians resort to coercion or to outright political propaganda in order to gain followers (Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015, p. 352). Moscow's instruments in the field are state controlled, without the involvement of the civic sector, contrary to what Nye suggested about "interaction between government and the NGO sector in the soft power domain" (Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015, p. 358). Russian soft power is dependent on national leaders, it draws on shared religious faith with foreign nations and often portrays itself as the staunch defender against the Ottoman Empire in the past and against American hegemony today (Galeotti, 2017, p. 5).

The central instrument of Russian soft power strategies is the media and the disinformation campaign of false or distorted news they spread (Galeotti, 2017). Specific "innovation" in this regard is made up of an army of Internet "trolls" who disseminate Kremlin talking points, stigmatize its critics or simply obstruct the online discussions (Galeotti, 2017, p. 6).

A very specific place in the projection of Russian soft power abroad is devoted to the Russian Orthodox Church. In the unusual cohabitation for the formally secular state, the spiritual pillar of the Russian nation and the state for the first time formalized their relationship in 2003, after the visit of the Patriarch Aleksey II to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On that occasion, a standing working group was established with representatives from both institutions and their "strategic sessions" were dedicated to "the planning of the Patriarch's international travels and evaluation of the ROC's activities in international organizations..." (Herpen, 2016).

In essence, the key target of Moscow's soft power is not to offer an alternative, but, to undermine the European Union in particular and Western values, and their soft power in general. According to the global index of soft power, the Russian Federation is at the bottom of the chart, placed 26th out of the 30 countries compared (USC, 2017, p. 41). A reasonable estimation of the global reach of its soft power is that Russia can achieve cultural predominance in the former republics of the USSR, and together with China - in Eurasia, probably at a level similar to the one the US enjoys in the Americas. However, the key precondition for such an outcome would be for the heavy-hand of Moscow to be pulled back, and, instead, the hand of commerce to be extended to these regions and states (Hill, 2006, p. 342).

In 2018 Russia scored well as host to the World Cup in football which has been correctly described as the first soft power success for the country in 30 years since Gorbachev's perestroika. Some hoped that this might be a turning point for Russia, but, realistically speaking, such a sudden switch to soft power is impossible for a country so long accustomed

to using hard power. Obviously, the annexation of Crimea, the war in eastern Ukraine, the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 incident and the Skripal case are going to stay on the bilateral agenda between Russia and the West and will press heavily against Moscow's ambitions (Kolesnikov, 2018).

The Balkans: Clash between Western and Eastern Soft Powers

As Stephen Blank correctly observed five years ago, the Balkans remain one of the arenas of geo-political rivalry between the West and Russia, but, instead of armies, today's struggle involves competing political models: the liberal and post-nationalist model of the European Union as opposed to the authoritarian model of Moscow (Blank, 2013, p. 1). An official American position confirmed this in February 2015, when US Secretary of State Kerry testified before the US Senate Sub-Committee on Russian influence in Eastern Europe and said that countries like Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro are "in the line of fire", much like Georgia or Moldova (Bechev, 2015, p. 1).

In the early 1990s, the United States mostly used hard power in an attempt to contain the negative effects provoked by the bloody dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. Its soft power, accompanied by that of the EU, appeared on the menu later on. For quite a long time, Western soft power was without peer in the Balkans because all regional countries were determined to join Euro-Atlantic integrations. Within that context, the most potent tool was the enlargement policy of two pivotal organizations of the Western Alliance. And, the result in expanding the euro-Atlantic zone of security and stability in post-communism was impressive. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, NATO accepted 13 former communist states from Eastern Europe, six of them from the Balkans; whilst, the EU integrated 11 former communist states, four of them from the Balkan region. Yet, after the failed attempt to adopt a Constitution for Europe, and the global financial crises, the European political elites started to question the dynamic of enlargement. The "enlargement fatigue" of Brussels was additionally strengthened by the unprecedented migrant crises and rise of nationalist and populist parties in Europe. All of the above have contributed in diminishing the attractiveness of the European project and the soft power of the West, in general.

The particular limitation of EU soft power on the Balkans is embodied in its old and widely known dichotomy, explained by Hill in 1993, as the "capabilities-expectation gap" (Nielsen, 2013, p. 724), in other words, the inability to enforce its policies when its soft power is denied. Well aware of this shortfall in the EU arsenal, many regional politicians have been readily substituting real reforms with political rhetoric about reforms.

In the meantime, a tendency that was largely not recognized by the West was incremental in the return of Russian diplomacy to the peninsula. According to some observers, Moscow was responding to what it perceived as being long-lasting, massive Western influences which were threatening its historic connections with Eastern Europe (Barber, 2015, p. 1). Foreign

Minister Lavrov offered a very unusual statement for this advance insisting that Russia's only aim was to counter "unprecedented measures to discredit Russian politics and distort the Russian image" (Barber, 2015, p. 3).

The Russian soft power strategy on the Balkans is based upon three tiers: first, a focus on "historical narratives of ethnic and religious solidarity", second, the promotion of its system of autocratic rule as being suitable for the young democracies, and third, and the most important, energy contracts and humanitarian aid (Barber, 2015, p. 1). In an attempt to promote its values, in the past decade Russia opened dozens of cultural centers throughout the Slavonic nations in the Balkans, including language learning services and educational programs, and hosting other cultural events. What is important to note is that the very content of Russian cultural and spiritual values could pose an obstacle for successfully penetrating the whole of the Balkans because many people in the region have a different ethnic and religious legacy from the Russian one.

In the energy field, in 2008, Russia bought 51 per cent of the Serbian oil monopoly as a last move in a string of energy acquisitions made that year in the Balkans. The deal was supposed to enable Moscow to send more natural gas to Europe, through the planned South Stream pipeline (Dempsey, 2008). The South Stream project was envisaged as a means of transporting Russian gas to Europe, by bypassing Ukraine, but, the European Commission, on the ground that the pipeline is in breach with EU competition rules, asked one of its member states in the Balkans, Bulgaria to suspend it (BBC, 2014). Although in the meantime, an alternative - the Turkish Stream is proceeding at a slow pace and its projected network and overall capacity is well below that of South Stream, the United States is nevertheless strongly against it, because, in the words of its Energy Secretary, Russia is trying to "solidify its control over the security and the stability of Central and Eastern Europe" (cited in Gotev, 2018).

The latest tendency in the Balkan states, with the exception of Albania and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is an upsurge of a cluster of diverse political parties which openly align themselves with Russian political and cultural values. In that camp, one can find social conservatives, socialists, nationalists, populists, militarists, but, their common denominator is their support of anti-Western sentiments (Barber, 2015, p. 4).

With regard to Russian propaganda, a principal problem of the US and the EU for a number of years has been underestimating the effects of a new phenomenon - fake news in social media and on digital platforms. By manipulating information, Russia aimed at interrupting the political decision-making and the legitimacy of Western societies. And, the Western response was partially passive, partially reactive (Hegedus, 2015). Major changes in this policy approach happened only after 2016 with the Brexit referendum, and the meddling of Moscow in the US presidential elections. The crucial challenge was to explain the difference between the support of Washington and Brussels for democracy abroad and Russian propaganda, as they share a "similar pattern and policy toolkits" (Hegedus, 2015). And as always, the best possible answer to political propaganda is - telling the truth.

Conclusions

Some experts (*cf.* Li, 2018) claim that the era of soft power is gradually giving way to hard power platforms, as countries are allegedly more prone to applying the latter. The Russian annexation of Crimea and its military incursions in Syria; along with North Korea's ongoing nuclear program; and the deployment of national armies against migrants from the Middle East and North Africa are the latest examples of this. Two crucial arguments for preferring this twist of strategies are: the negative results of the Western project for "exporting democracy"; and second, the awareness of states that by only using soft power, it is impossible to realize the whole spectrum of national interests in the 21st century, when geopolitics is back on the agenda. As a matter of fact, for the latter, even the creator of the concept never ever assigned that type of potential to soft power instruments (Li, 2018).

A realistic assessment of the clash between the Western and Eastern narratives on the Balkans will display the dominance of the former and the reduced role of the latter to the status of being a "spoiler", because it offers no viable option in the long run (Morelli, 2018). When speaking about democratic deviations in the region, Bechev is right in arguing that "dysfunctional democracies and authoritarian policies are, on the whole, homegrown ills, and not a sinister plot by Moscow" (cited in Morelli, 2017).

Most of the Western media narrative in recent years has exaggerated the effects of the Russian propaganda machine (Junes, 2017). In his book on Russian influence in Southeast Europe, Bechev correctly observed that various polls in the region confirmed that "favorable opinions of Russia are on the increase, but that western-centric attitudes are still more entrenched and western popular culture ...serves as the main reference point for the overall majority of people in the region" (cited in Junes, 2017). It is also true that Russian inroads into the Balkan realm served as a justification for western governments to intensify their support for the resistance of civic movements against regional autocrats.

Speaking about the strategic goals of the regional countries, the prospects of the EU and NATO membership remain strong, compared to the oppositional offerings of the eastern competitor (Patalakh, 2017, p. 148). Despite the Russian foreign-policy goal of stopping regional countries from joining NATO and the EU, Montenegro cut off its political and business ties with Moscow and was immediately absorbed into the Alliance in 2017. Additionally, the country is the regional front runner in negotiations with the EU. In 2018, Macedonia resolved its long standing dispute with Greece over its name, thus removing the last obstacle for its NATO membership. In June 2018, the Council of the European Union set out the path towards opening accession negotiations with Macedonia and Albania in June 2019 (Emmott, 2018). Even Serbia which declared military neutrality is not leaving membership of the NATO Partnership for Peace program, and routinely participates in joint exercises with NATO members (BBC, 2018), and at the same time is half-way in its negotiations with the EU, expecting to become a full-fledged member by 2025 (Stone, 2018).

Three decades after the demise of communism, no single state in the Balkans has changed its strategic direction because of Russian activities in the region, or announced its intention to leave the Western organizations motivated by the Eastern alternatives. The combined soft power of the West contributed immensely to this outcome.

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